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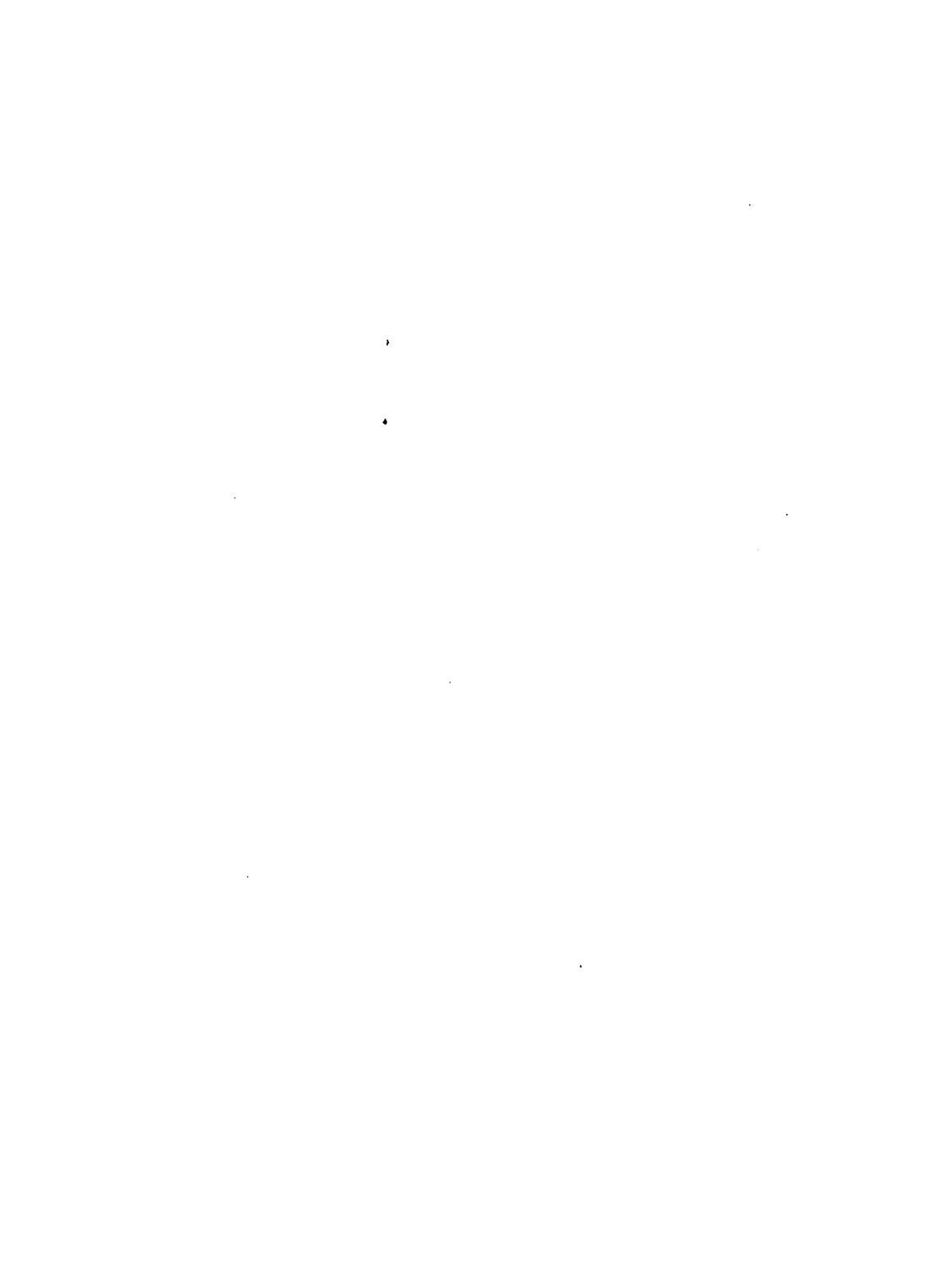
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HESTER'S SACRIFICE

VOL. II.



HESTER'S SACRIFICE

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE'S,” “JANITA'S CROSS,”

&c. &c.

“Life counts not hours by joys or pangs,
But just by duties done.”

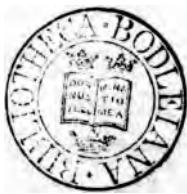
IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

“SISTER HETTIE.”

“Little May.”

“Oh! I am so glad to be at home again.”

And then, for the twentieth time, the soft rosy cheek was nestled down on that so true and faithful heart—that sisterly heart which, far above any of its own hopes and joys, would treasure the happiness of little May.

Yes—the dying mother, over whose grave, in that far off western isle, the orange trees had shed ten summers’ wealth of snowy blossom, chose a safe shelter for her



HESTER'S SACRIFICE

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the flowers beautiful. No—you must have lain down in the shade of those trees and felt the cool wind rippling through their leaves, and heard the song of the birds, and closed your eyes for dreamy languor as the warm air stole past you bringing with it the fragrant breath of rose and eglantine from many a blossom-laden bower, ere you could tell forth all the beauty and sweet-ness of the sunny June time. And so you must have held that little pet sister of Hester's in your arms, and had her soft, velvety fingers twining about you, and felt the touch of her lips, and looked into the blue depths of those glancing eyes, to know *how* beautiful she was.

But if May Tredegar was just a living sunbeam for lightness and brightness and beauty, she was by no means superior to

the ordinary wants of humanity. For, after she had kissed many and many a time the hand she held so fast, and stroked very lovingly those braids of soft shining hair on which her own rested, she said, with most child-like naturalness,

“Sister Hettie, I’m so hungry. Are we going to have tea soon?”

“Yes, darling, directly. See, here is Jane bringing it in.”

Just at that moment Jane Fawcet came with the urn and a plateful of sugar biscuits, which Margaret, remembering Miss May’s olden fondness for sweets, had made that morning. She set them down leisurely, and then busied herself with going round and round the table, making various little needless alterations in its arrangements, casting now and then a quick observant glance

towards May, who was still fondling and caressing her sister.

There was a peculiar quietness in all Jane Fawcet's ways. No one ever heard her footstep, and yet she was always moving about. She seemed to pervade the house with that silent presence of hers. Over and over again, Hester, thinking herself alone in the parlour, busily engaged in drawing or working, had been startled, on turning round, to find Jane close by, always, however, engaged in something which appeared to give her a perfect right to be there. She was dusting a few books which had been forgotten in the morning, or she was carrying away some faded flowers from Miss Tredegar's table, or she fancied her mistress had rung the bell, or Margaret had sent her with a message which required

an answer. And when Mrs. Brayton or Miss Lapiter came to tea—which the latter very frequently did—Jane, like a shadow, flitted about the room, so attentive to their slightest wants, so dutiful and observant, so different from poor Sally, who, having a morbid repugnance to the presence of what she called “quality,” used to dart out of the room at every available opportunity, and only return when obliged to do so.

And Jane did her parlour duties, too, with such well-bred, servant-like indifference to whatever was going on in the room. Miss Lapiter might relate the richest little bits of gossip, she might tell the raciest stories, or turn out the most laughable of fragments from the crowded storehouse of her memory, but neither look nor motion betrayed that the quiet, pale-faced girl who

waited upon her so assiduously, had heard a single word. Nor did she ever retail to Margaret anything that she had seen in the parlour. She never amused herself, as Sally used sometimes to do, by repeating Miss Lapiter's funny stories and scraps of Angusbury gossip, or by imitating any of the good-natured little maiden lady's peculiarities of manner. Everything that Jane Fawcet heard or saw in that Milcote parlour was kept to herself. She might ponder over it at night, and work it into her own plans and purposes, as she sat hour after hour in her own room alone. She might be remembering it on Sunday mornings at church, crouching behind that old stone pillar in Milcote pew, gazing so patiently towards the curtained recess in the chancel where the Lellandsbridge people sat. Be

that as it might, she gave no outward sign of interest. All that she saw, all that she heard, dropped as into a deep well, from which it never rose to light any more.

“And so that is our new maid, is it?” said May, when Jane had gone out of the room, having lingered as long as there was any excuse for doing so; “what a queer-looking girl! Her face reminds me of that old yellow china jug of ours, that had to be tied round to keep it from cracking in two. And why does she have that frumpy old thing on her head, covering up her hair just like a quaker? The servants in France wear such pretty caps. You ought to make her take it off.”

“I don’t interfere with her tastes,” said Hester, “for she is not a girl that would

bear much speaking to; and whilst she does her work so nicely it seems a pity to vex her about such a trifle. Perhaps she has not sufficient hair to accommodate the little buttons of caps that housemaids generally wear, and so she is obliged to have a good substantial one tied down under her chin. She is not a girl that cares to look attractive. But will you fetch papa, May?—the tea is quite ready.”

Away went May, and came dancing back with Mr. Tredegar, who seemed half amused, half perplexed with the mirthful, caressing ways of his young daughter. It was so strange to him to have a little soft hand thrust into his lean fingers, and to have kisses continually sprinkled over him, sometimes on his lips, sometimes on his forehead, sometimes on his hair, by this little sprite

of a creature, who kept hovering about like a butterfly, first to her papa, and then to Hester. Very strange and pleasant for a time, as strange things often are; but doubtless Mr. Tredegar would tire of it by and by, and find out, after all, that there is nothing like silent affection.

They had not half finished tea when there came a succession of tiny raps at the front door—rap which, for lightness and delicacy of touch, were never given by anyone but the mistress of Rose Cottage.

“That is Miss Lapiter, I am sure,” Hester said. “May I tell Jane to bring her here? You won’t mind it for once, will you, papa?”

“Certainly not, my dear. Miss Lapiter may come wherever you like.”

That was a wonderful confession for Mr.

Tredegar, who would generally abscond to the remotest corner of the house rather than encounter an unexpected visitor. But Basil Brooke's calls, which had been rather frequent of late, might perhaps have developed a little latent sociality even in the stern and stately master of Milcote. So Miss Lapiter was brought into the parlour, floating upon a tide of apologies and excuses.

“So sorry, my dear Miss Hester, so very sorry; and I’m sure I beg your pardon again and again for interrupting you at such an unseasonable time. But, you see, I understood Miss May was coming home earlier in the afternoon, in which case you would have got the attendant circumstances over before now. And I was so anxious to offer you my best congratulations—my very

best congratulations on the dear young lady's return to the bosom of her family. Welcome to Angusbury, Miss May, and may you live to spend many and many a happy year in the old place!—that is, unless some one takes a fancy to you, and nips you up and carries you away."

And Miss Lapiter, who was half concealed by a huge bouquet of roses, looked round for a convenient place to deposit them, in order that she might have her two arms at liberty to bestow a warm embrace on the fair young girl who stood before her. At last she set them on a little table by the window, and gave May a hearty squeeze.

"It's a welcome, my dear, a welcome to Angusbury—I mean the roses, and a compliment to youth and beauty. I was thinking

of bringing you something to eat, some of those little rock-cakes which I used to make for you, when you were at home, two years ago, only——”

“Oh! Miss Lapiter!” and May’s face expressed genuine disappointment, “and why didn’t you? I do love rock-cakes.”

“Well, my dear, I was not quite sure whether you would be open to such a present, at your time of life. Young ladies at seventeen generally begin to have a taste for sweets of a more romantic kind. And really, when I do venture to carry anything in the eating department about with me in that little brown basket of mine, I am so followed by the Angusbury children, begging it from me, and poor little things, it goes to my heart to refuse them, though how they contrive to find out anything of that kind, and so care-

fully covered up with a napkin, too, passes my comprehension. But it's the juvenile instinct, that is just what it is; and so I brought you these roses instead, which I hope you will take in the spirit of love and affection, and Joan shall bring the solid offerings of friendship at a future opportunity. I made a very pretty little speech as I was coming along, to present to you with the flowers; something about roses without thorns, and hoping that your life would be like—but never mind, I've forgotten the rest, so you must take the will for the deed."

And then Miss Lapiter folded May up in her arms a second time, and pressed a hearty kiss on the rosy face, which grew still rosier with the warmth of the salute.

"There, there, child," and Miss Lapiter rubbed a tear out of her eye. "You remind

me so of my poor sister that died in the bloom of life, forty years ago next cherry blossom time. And now I must put on my spectacles, and have a good look at you. You know it is not every day we have the chance in Angusbury of seeing a young lady fresh from the Continent."

May dropped her eyelids demurely, and held her arms straight down by her side, like a naughty school-girl expecting a reprimand from her governess. She looked the very incarnation of merry mischief, standing there, with downcast glance, and lips so closely folded together, that only the slightest little bit of a smile found room to struggle through the corners of them.

"A bundle of tricks," said Miss Lapiter, shaking her head, "just nothing in the world but a bundle of tricks; not a bit more pro-

priety than you had two years ago, and not a bit more of a woman either, except the stature and the prettiness.

‘Eyes of light, and lips of roses,
Such as Hylas wore—’

though who Hylas was, I never could find out. Oh! Miss May! I’m afraid you’ll make a serious difference in the Angusbury valentine trade, next February.”

“Valentines! shocking, Miss Lapiter. I wonder how you can mention anything of the sort to a person of my age and respectability,” and May made a funny little gesture, expressing the most lady-like contempt of anything so vulgar as hearts and darts and Cupids. “Always shut my eyes when I go past a valentine shop, because it’s so corrupting to the morals. Very improper things indeed for young people!”

“But there May broke down, and finished her tirade against valentines by a gush of merry laughter, so hearty and contagious that even Mr. Tredegar, who had striven hard to retain a grave exterior, was forced to set down his cup and join it.

“Well, well, child”—and Miss Lapiter turned to Hester—“I won’t talk to you any more, or my poor old mouth will never come straight again. I always find laughing a most laborious exercise. How does your new servant answer, Miss Hester?”

“Very well indeed, Miss Lapiter, thank you. Margaret says that, with the exception of a little fit of sullenness now and then, she has no fault to find with her. I am sure we are very much obliged to you for mentioning her to us.”

“Not at all, my dear, not at all. I was

sure from the very first that she would be just the one for a quiet place like Milcote. Steady, you know, and not given to gadding about, like most other girls, and not over-anxious, either, to make a good bargain for herself; indeed, I was quite pleased with the way in which she listened to what I told her about the situation. You know some girls would have been all questions and stipulations, and reservations, and they must have this, that, and the other privilege, and no end of time to themselves, besides being out till nine o'clock on a Sunday evening, which is a most pernicious thing for a careful mistress to allow, and therefore I hope you will never allow it, my dear. But, as I was saying, this Jane Fawcet never made any requirements of the sort, and seemed as docile and humble

as a child going out to place for the first time. And so, on the whole, I think I may say again, as I said before, that the opening was providential, nothing else but providential."

Miss Lapiter paused a few moments, and then, with a decisive nod, which caused the sparrow-bow on the top of her bonnet to flap its wings as if in confirmation of the statement, repeated her previous remark—

"Providential, my dear Miss Hester, nothing else but providential."

CHAPTER II.

AND there the mistress of Rose Cottage was obliged to change the subject, for Jane Fawcet had just come in to take away the tea-things.

She stepped about the room in her usual stealthy, quiet way, apparently taking no notice of anything, though, indeed, the most well-bred of servants might have been pardoned for a smile, seeing that May had taken the opportunity of Miss Lapiter's absorption in the servant subject to stick sprays of roses all over her bonnet; and now, the important operation being finished,

she led the unconscious victim up to the mirror over the fireplace to survey her altered appearance.

“There now—haven’t I improved you?” said the mischievous little sprite. “I’ve been thinking, ever since you came into the room, that that poor old brown sparrow wanted something to chirp in. Now if you will wait a minute, you’ll see him hop upon one of those branches and begin to whistle; you know he couldn’t sing when he was sitting so uncomfortably just on the edge of your bonnet, poor fellow!”

“Oh! you abominable little creature,” said the worthy spinster. “Didn’t I say you would make a difference when you came to Milcote? Seventeen years old, and no more notion of the proprieties of life than to make a jack-in-the-green of an old wo-

man in her sixty-ninth year. I see all the French governesses haven't made a woman of you yet. You're not a bit altered, except being prettier, from the time two years ago, when you came down to my house with a message from your sister to ask me to send her my receipt for marmalade, and would I step down and help her to prepare the oranges—oh! you mischief!—and you *knew* all the time that I was dressing feathers and couldn't have left them without the greatest personal inconvenience—no, not even to wait upon the Queen of England. And when I'd changed my gown and trotted all the way down to Milcote, it was a joke—nothing in the world but a joke. Oh! Miss May, Miss May!"

"I don't care a bit," said May, pressing her rosy lips to the kind old face which,

in spite of a futile attempt to look vexed, was running over with the purest good-nature—“I don’t care a bit; you ought to have given a poor woman sixpence to do them for you, instead of sitting up there like an owl in an ivy bush, all over down and feathers. I’d do it again if I had the chance. I’m sure I would.”

“I daresay you would, only you couldn’t catch me with marmalade again, or work upon my unsuspecting affections as you did before. And you shouldn’t be asked into the best parlour either, and left there to dress up the kitten in poor dear grandmamma’s thread lace collar and mittens, whilst I changed my dress and came down to you. A pretty sight, indeed!”

“Yes, you were a pretty sight, Miss Lapiter, for you’d forgotten to put your

cap on, and I saw all your grey hair sticking out behind under the flaxen curls. I never knew it was only a front till then."

"Miss May, how dare you? And your papa in the room, too, though I don't suppose he thinks that at my time of life I can get flaxen curls except from the hair-dresser's. Still, one doesn't like to have a front exposed, and the grey hairs mentioned sticking out behind, which ought to be a crown of glory, only an unmarried woman finds it difficult to realise them as such. At least I know I should be very happy to resign my crown, if it was only to save the expense of fronts. But never mind, Miss May; you'll be old yourself some-day if you live long enough, and then, perhaps, somebody will be wicked enough to mention

your grey hairs sticking out behind, and perhaps your front, too, in the presence of a gentleman. Which isn't soothing to the feelings—no, it isn't indeed, Miss May. And now, by way of returning good for evil, I'm going to tell you of a treat I have been planning for you. Do you think you deserve a treat now, like the naughty little girl in the nursery rhymes?"

"No, ma'am, I'm sure I don't." And May drew down the corners of her lips and dropped a demure curtsy. And then she added, just as demurely, "But I know you'll give me it all the same."

"Just listen to the child," and Miss Lapiter held up her hands, pretending to be scandalised. It was a long time since such a merry performance had been carried on in that quiet Milcote parlour. Certainly

May appeared likely to make "difference" enough in the home life of the Tredegar family, if she intended to go on after this fashion.

"This is what I mean to do, then. I am going to have a picnic to the Monk's Crag sometime in August; just a nice comfortable party, as many as can put away a couple of fowls, and apricot tart to match."

"Oh! you dear old creature," and May gave Miss Lapiter a perfect rain-storm of kisses. Hester's face brightened too, though she said nothing. She had heard Miss Lapiter discuss this picnic affair before, and intimate that Basil Brooke was to be asked to join it.

"A nice quiet little party. Mrs. Brayton and myself to keep you in order, and

Hester and you, and Nils Brayton and Basil Brooke."

"And pray who is Basil Brooke?" asked May.

"Basil Brooke is the master of the School of Art; a middle-aged gentleman, with grey hair," answered Miss Lapiter.

"Nonsense. I'm sure he can't have grey hair with such a pretty name as that. Basil Brooke, Basil Brooke," and May chanted the name over and over in her girlish, musical voice. "It sounds like all sorts of pleasant pictures. I'm sure he can't be old enough to have grey hair. And who is Mr. Brayton?"

"Mr. Brayton, my dear, is in the War Department here. A quiet person, but very gentlemanly. I mean him to show you the beauties of Monk's Crag."

“Then I don’t mean him to do anything of the sort; for if it’s the same Mr. Brayton that used to come two years ago, I remember him—a stiff man, and dreadfully upright.”

“Miss May, you must go back to school, and adjust your adverbs and adjectives. Mr. Brayton is upright, certainly, but not to any dreadful extent. You know military men always carry themselves in that sort of way.”

“Then they carry themselves in a very disagreeable sort of way, and I won’t have anything to do with them. I don’t like men that have no more bend in them than those great sycamores in Milcote Lane. And he hasn’t even so much, for the sycamores do curtsey a little bit when there is a strong wind; but Mr. Brayton doesn’t seem

as if anything could ever move him. He is what I call *dreadfully* upright."

"Mr. Brayton carries himself like a man who dare face the whole world, Miss May, knowing that he has never done anything to make him ashamed of himself, and that is how every Englishman ought to walk. Now be quiet, if you please, for I won't have you coming home from France and finding fault with our Angusbury gentlemen. But you know, my dear,"—and here Miss Lapiter turned to Hester—"we cannot have our pic-nic just yet, because Mr. Brayton has gone away. I missed him passing the end of the terrace on his way to the office, for you know he generally passes like clock-work at ten minutes to ten, so much so that Joan always sets the pudding on by Mr. Brayton; and when I inquired

about it, I found he was away in London. And I heard, too, what I was very sorry to hear, and the more so since Mrs. Brayton told me it, and so there is every reason to believe it is correct, namely, that he is likely to be sent abroad with his company before long."

Jane Fawcet had finished clearing the table some time ago, yet she lingered still, contriving various little pretexts for remaining in the room whilst Miss Lapiter was speaking. Just now there was a gleam of light in those dull, dark eyes, and the slightest quiver on the thin lips that were always so firmly pressed together.

"There, Jane," said Hester, "I think everything is neat enough. You can go now."

"Yes, Miss."

But that was the very last thing Jane Fawcet meant to do. It was something more than a quiet direction, such as Hester had given, that could send her out of the room whilst Miss Lapiter was talking about the Lellandsbank people. She looked round. On the little table by the window lay May's bunch of votive roses, somewhat disarranged now, in consequence of the meddlesome fingers that had robbed them for the decoration of Miss Lapiter's bonnet. Jane passed that little table in going out, and contrived to sweep the roses to the ground, with all the loose leaves and stalks. There was work enough now to keep her in the room for at least ten minutes longer.

“I’m very sorry, Miss,” she said, as she stooped down to clear the littered carpet.

“I’m sure it isn’t like me to upset anything, for I always do my best to be careful. I’ll pick them up myself, thank you, Miss,” she added, for May had jumped up to help her; “I don’t mind the trouble, and it was all my own fault.”

May frisked back again to her papa’s side, and Miss Lapiter resumed Mr. Brayton’s prospects.

“Yes, somewhere abroad, and before long, too, though in the Government service people never seem to know what they’re likely to be going to do. Mrs. Brayton thought India, or somewhere in that direction. Poor dear lady, she seemed sadly troubled about it, and no wonder, because, you see, Mr. Nils is all she has to care for, and since he returned from the West Indies, ten years ago, he has been such a dutiful

son, so devoted to his mother, and so steady, and everything that's proper for a young man to be. It's perfectly beautiful is his devotion to his mother, Miss May, although you do call him dreadfully upright."

To which remark Miss May deigned no reply, only she gave her head a saucy little toss, waking thereby a whole nest of sunbeams which had been sleeping amongst the golden curls. And that saucy little toss said plainly enough—

"I don't like this Mr. Brayton of yours, and I won't have anything to do with him."

It also implied that if Miss Lapiter, in her innocent love for match-making, thought to advance Mr. Brayton's interests in that direction, those interests would be best advanced

by judicious silence. At any rate, Miss Lapiter appeared so to interpret the sign, for she enlarged no more on Mr. Brayton's filial perfections; and after a few more general remarks on the prospects of the Lellands-bank people—how soon this foreign plan might be put into execution, whether Mrs. Brayton would go out with her son, or whether he would take a wife with him—during all which remarks Jane Fawcet had been slowly gathering up the scattered rose-leaves, she put on her gloves and prepared to depart, saying as she did so,

“There is Milcote church clock striking seven. The clocks about here seem as if they had nothing to do but to strike. I am sure I had no idea it was so late.”

That was generally the sentiment with which Miss Lapiter terminated her calls.

She always had so much to say, and so many kind wishes to express, and such tales of Angusbury gossip to unfold, that dinner-time, or tea-time, or rest-time, as the case might be, came long before her story was ended; and then, with an invariable, "I had no idea that it was so late," she used to jump up and run away. Hester thought that when the final rest-time came, and death, like a watchful mother by the bed-side of her wearied child, extinguished the little light which had burned so clearly, Miss Lapiter would just say, "Dear, me! I had no idea it was so late," and then go peacefully to sleep.

She had scarcely reached the gate, when she came trotting back again, for a fresh thought had struck her.

"Just one moment, my dear Miss Hester. I have been thinking that it would be very

convenient to have a servant at this pic-nic, to relieve our minds of the crockery, and that sort of thing; and whilst my roses are in bloom so beautifully as they are now, I cannot leave the garden by itself, for fear of thieves, or Joan should have had a treat, and gone with the greatest of pleasure. And so I have been thinking, Miss Hester, that if you could spare Jane Fawcet it would be a change for the poor girl, and brighten her up a little. There is nothing like a day in the country for brightening people up, and she would carry away the things to the gate-keeper's cottage, and get them packed ready for returning, whilst we are enjoying ourselves, and then she might have the rest of the day to ramble about where she liked over the crags. So that you see our convenience would be somebody else's gratifi-

cation, which I always like it to be, when we can manage it. What do you think?"

Hester was quite agreeable, and promised to speak to Jane Fawcet about it next day, in order that the girl might have the pleasure of looking forward to a treat. And with that Miss Lapiter once more took her departure, and the sparrow bow was soon out of sight amongst the sycamores of Milcote Lane.

CHAPTER III.

MAY'S return did indeed make a difference to the hitherto dull monotonous household of Milcote. Always now there was a musical voice carolling in the sunshiny garden—carolling so merrily that the robins and blackbirds there might have thought it belonged to one of their own relations who had come to spend the summer with them; or there was a light footstep pattering hither and thither across the gloomy stone passages, and like a beam of sunshine that bright face, with its never-fading smile, used to light up the old

rooms once so very still and empty. Wher-ever May came, that place was full of life. There was an affluence of vitality about her, which seemed to overflow and supply every-one else.

Mr. Tredegar was not allowed any more quiet evening readings now by his study-table, or in that tall, straight-backed chair which stood under the book-case in the parlour. Scarcely had he settled himself behind some huge folio full of misty half fabulouis researches into the interiors of foreign countries, when two white hands would come over his shoulder, and the book would be thrust away, and instead of it May would take her place on his knee, and begin to talk the most unmiti-gated nonsense to him, by way of altera-tive, as she called it, to the severer labours

of the day. And whether Mr. Tredegar chose or not, he was obliged to submit. His half vexed, "No, no, child, I want to be quiet," produced no more effect on that merry little youngest daughter than shot upon a pillow of down. Away went the book, and May was queen for the rest of the evening.

The child did just as she liked with everyone in the house. Never was there such a lovable tyrant as May Tredegar. No one could resist that pretty smile of hers, or those coaxing caressing ways, which were so perfectly natural that they never wearied or palled. She got her own way in everything. If she wanted to go for a long ramble through the woods and fields, her sister's drawing must be put away, and that pleasant afternoon at the School

of Art given up. For May would plead with smiles and kisses at first, but if these failed, the tears would tremble in her blue-eyes, and the red lips would pout with pretty petulance; and rather than see those tears, or hear those grieved tones, Hester would forget her own pleasure, and without letting May hear a single word of regret, she would relinquish what was now her choicest delight. It was for May, and she had promised to be very kind to little May.

Then, too, she had such a playful way of taking upon herself those daughterly duties which had hitherto been Hester's sole privilege. May must now fetch her papa's slippers and put his boots ready for him. And when he came in from his long solitary walks, it was May's hand which held his

study-coat ready, and put his hat and stick away in their respective places, just where he could easily find them again. And then, whilst he rested in his chair, May would nestle up to him and put her hand into his and lay her cheek upon his arm, just as the long ago dead wife used to do in those first sweet years of their married life. Perhaps it was this memory which made Mr. Tredegar bear so patiently the raid upon his old habits and preferences. For all the love that he had ever given or would ever give belonged to her who slept so quietly beneath the orange groves of that far-off western island.

Hester could not help a slight cramp of bitterness sometimes, as she watched her father's grave face relax into a smile over May's winning ways, or saw him kiss, as

though half ashamed of his weakness, those rosy lips which seemed only made for smiles and caresses. She loved him as deeply as this young daughter, she served him as faithfully; yet because her love was so shy, and her service so silently done, he knew not of it. She inherited his own reserved, sensitive nature, which never told how much it felt; and which, because it could not speak, must needs keep hidden all its rich store of love and longing. But when such thoughts as these came into Hester's mind, she stilled them with the words which had carried her safely through many a year of loving, patient duty,

“Hester, take care of little May, and be very good to her. She will have no one but you.”

That was her trust, and she would keep

it as God gave her strength, let it cost what it might.

It was a week or two after May's return, and the two sisters sat together in the parlour, May idling away the time by making paper azaleas, Hester painting a little group of flowers as a birthday present for Miss Lapiter, who was to complete her sixty-ninth year in a few days. Suddenly May jumped up, scattering her azalea leaves in a white shower on the carpet.

“Sister Hester, there is some one coming up the garden walk.”

“Who is it, May?”

“How can I tell? I don't know any of the stupid Angusbury people. It is a tall gentleman with grey hair.”

Hester's heart beat rather more quickly,

but she went on with her work in silence.

“I’m going away,” said May. “I don’t want to see him, for I’ve made a tear in the front of my dress with trying to reach those cluster roses over the arbour. You’ll mend it for me, won’t you, Hester, dear, to-morrow?” And suiting the action to the word, she danced out of the room, and was up at the top of the stairs before Basil Brooke rang the bell, her golden curls swaying over the balustrades as she leaned her head forward to catch a passing glimpse of the stranger, whoever he might be.

According to his own account, Mr. Brooke had come to bring a volume of travels for Mr. Tredegar, and he expressed a suitable amount of regret when he learned that the

master of the house was not at home. Still, he was anything but sorry to find that parlour unoccupied, save by Hester. A quiet chat with her in the Milcote parlour, or, as he so often contrived without any apparent contrivance, to have it now, beside her easel at the School of Art, was a pleasure which always left a very fragrant memory behind.

Hester, so Mr. Brooke used to think to himself as he sauntered amongst the chalk squares and antiques, was so different to most of the Angusbury girls. There was such a cultivated refinement about her; you never heard her make a common-place remark, even when she was speaking about common-place things. There was a finished beauty in her thoughts and words, which, to a man of his fine perceptions, was very

fascinating. If he could wish anything added, it would be a little more animation, just a tinge of that enthusiasm which, carried to too great an extent, makes women be characterised as "gushing." Still Moselle was very beautiful in its way, and very refreshing; but he must confess he liked the sparkling variety occasionally. However, perfection was not to be expected in this world. Hester came as near it as any girl he had ever seen, as any girl he was ever likely to see in this dull, quiet little Angusbury town, where his life lot was lost.

"I find you always at your favourite work," he said playfully, as Jane Fawcet ushered him into the parlour, and, with a sidelong glance, took note of Hester's pleased smile. "May I look at what you are doing?"

Hester gave him her drawing-board, on which a few sprays of jasmine seemed to lie as if they had fallen there by accident, with such skill was each delicate green leaf and star-like blossom painted.

“This is very beautiful,” said Basil Brooke, carefully criticising Hester’s production. “I see you do not keep your best efforts for the School of Art. And pray what is the destiny of these flowers?”

“I am going to send them to Miss Lapiter for a birthday present.”

“Miss Lapiter, the kind old soul. Just give me your brush a moment, and I will make a love-knot for them.”

She gave it to him, and, with a few light strokes, he drew a brown bow, just like that marvellous piece of millinery which

Miss Lapiter wore on the top of her best Dunstable bonnet, with wings sticking out as if in act to fly.

“There now,” he said, as he gave Hester the brush again, “you must tell the dear old lady that is my birthday present to her.”

Hester could not help laughing. He had so exactly reproduced the whimsical little top-knot, and yet it answered its purpose so completely, and even tastefully, in linking the cluster of flowers, that kind-hearted, unconscious Miss Lapiter would be the very last person in the world to find out that any caricature of her pet adornment had been meditated. Yet even as Hester laughed over it, she felt that she could not have done that to any one who had spoken as kindly of her as the mistress of Rose

Cottage had spoken of Basil Brooke. But then, men were different from women, and the new master of the School of Art had such a store of playful, delicate satire. He could not help letting it overflow sometimes, and, besides, there was never any bitterness about it. She must not judge him too harshly.

“And is this your work, too, always busy over flowers?” he said, taking up the half-finished spray of azalea which May had let fall on the carpet when she danced away in such a hurry to escape the tall gentleman with grey hair.

“No; that belongs to May.”

“May! who is May? Oh! I remember now. Your little sister that you were expecting home so soon.”

And Basil Brooke pictured to himself a

merry child of eight or ten summers, a golden-haired, blue-eyed pet, just such a study as he wanted for the picture of little Red-Riding-Hood which he was painting then.

"I should like to see her. Where is she, this little May blossom sister of yours?"

"I will go and fetch her."

And Hester went away, leaving her portfolio open just as she had been using it when Mr. Brooke came in.

May was sitting before the glass in her own room, twisting up her hair into fanciful shapes, and studding it over with roses which she reached and gathered from the open window as she wanted them. A pretty young creature, certainly, and all the prettier because she did not seem to know it herself.

“May, won’t you come down and speak to Mr. Brooke?”

“Mr. Brooke! Oh! is that the Mr. Basil Brooke Miss Lapiter was talking about; and he *has* got grey hair, after all? No; I won’t come down;” and May shook her head until the rose leaves fell like snow flakes all over her neck and shoulders. “I won’t come down, because my hair isn’t neat, and there is this great tear just in the front of my frock. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Sister Hettie. I’ll peep at him through the banisters as he goes away, and then, if I like him, I can come in next time he calls.”

And so Hester went back to the parlour. She had not been gone five minutes, yet Basil Brooke had found time to turn over the leaves of the portfolio which she had

left open on the table, and see there the fern leaves which he had gathered from the Monk's Crag, with the date written beneath in her fine, clear hand.

He smiled to see them there, and treasured so carefully, too. He loved to be remembered by anyone, but by none so much as Hester. However, he made no remark about the fern leaves then, nor the far-back pleasant day which had given them their preciousness. Another time he might remind her of that.

“And so this little Miss May will not come in?” he said, as Helen returned alone. “Well, never mind; you must not let her be so shy next time I come. I must go now, or I shall be late for the class. Give the book to your papa, and tell him how sorry I am not to have seen him.”

Hester went to open the door. This was a piece of attention which the Milcote people always paid to their own guests. As Basil Brooke shook hands with her, he looked kindly down into her face.

“I shall always call you little Forget-me-not. I so often think of that picture of yours. I am glad I came to Angusbury, and learned to know you.”

Jane Fawcet, passing through the garden on her way to the village, heard those words, and did not miss the look which accompanied them. But she made no sign, as, with closely-folded lips and downcast eye she held open the gate for Mr. Brooke to go out first.

Hester went back to the parlour. It was not very much for anyone to have said to her; yet the remembrance of those words

made her sit still and thoughtful long after May had come downstairs again, and set to work upon the azalea flowers.

By-and-bye she came to Hester's side.

“Sister Hettie, what are you so still for?”

“Nothing, darling. I am only thinking.”

“I think you spend all the time thinking. When will that gentleman come again?”

“I don't know. Perhaps not for a long time.”

“Shall we see him anywhere?”

“You may see him to-morrow, if you go to the prize-giving at the School of Art.”

“Because, Sister Hettie——”

“Well, May?”

—“I *did* look through the banisters at him as he went away, and I like him very much. I think he is a very nice man; and I mean to come in next time he calls.”

CHAPTER IV.

BUT May was not destined to take her first legitimate survey of Mr. Brooke at the public giving of prizes. She had a headache, and was obliged to stay at home, greatly to her own disappointment. Indeed, she looked so pitiful at the prospect of being left behind, that Hester would willingly have stayed too; but the rules of the school were imperative, and those rules intimated that none of the pupils, unless able to give sufficient reason for so doing, should absent themselves from the yearly distribution of prizes. So, after almost as many

kisses and caresses and farewells as would have been suitable had the parting been for months instead of a single evening, May was left amongst her cushions, whilst Mr. Tredegar and his eldest daughter set off to the School of Art.

Just as they were going out of the gate, they met Miss Lapiter.

“On your way to be crowned, my dear, I suppose,” she said, with a proud look at her young favourite. “Well, I am going to the coronation too, for I have been looking forward ever so long to the pleasure of seeing Hester Tredegar wear the laurels she is to win this evening. And as I always like to be in good company, I have come to ask your papa if he will put me under his wing. But first, my dear, I must tell you that I have a message for Mrs.

Brayton, touching this picnic, which I specially want her to receive in time for Mr. Nils to bring me an answer as he comes to the office to-morrow morning; and as my poor Joan has been and gone and lamed her foot, I cannot send her, and so I thought perhaps you would let Jane Fawcet take it. I would have posted it, but the Lellandsbank people don't get their letters in a morning until after Mr. Brayton leaves for Angusbury. Now, my dear, you will not be offended at my taking such a liberty, will you?"

"Not at all, Miss Lapiter. I daresay Jane will be glad of a walk this fine evening."

"That is just what struck me, Miss Hester, and made me venture to ask you.. I have fixed the picnic for a week next

Monday, if the weather continue bright. You know, that is Mr. Brooke's spare evening, and I thought it best to make sure of him first, as he told me he should be very happy to accompany us there. And that is the message I want sending to Lel-landsbank, if you would be so kind as to let Jane take it. I knew there was no need to consult you about the day, as you told me that the beginning of next week would be quite convenient for you both."

"But had I not better send a note?" asked Hester. "You know either Jane or Mrs. Brayton might forget the exact day."

"Just like your thoughtfulness, Miss Hes-ter, to suggest that. Now I should have sent a verbal message, and then, as likely as not, Jane Fawcet would have forgotten

the day, though she doesn't look like a person who is in the habit of forgetting. But your eyes are younger than mine, my dear, so perhaps you will write it for me. Monday week, and to meet us at the gate-keeper's cottage at twelve o'clock, that is all."

Hester ran back to the house, wrote the note, gave it to Jane, with directions that it should be left at Lellandsbank that evening, and then they all three started for Angusbury."

That was a day of days for little Mr. Bilson. All the morning he had been frisking up and down the school, brush and duster in hand, removing imaginary specks of dust from the Greek gods and goddesses, and scrubbing the painted Cupids until they shone like charity-school boys on a Saturday

night. Then the pupils' drawings had to be gathered up for the master, whose duty it was to arrange them, according to their respective merits, on the canvas screens which lined the room. Basil Brooke used his own judgment as to the best productions, placing them where his practised eye saw their beauties would be exhibited to most advantage. But when he came to a third or fourth-rate sample, whose place was a matter of pure indifference, he would turn to his aide-de-camp, and say—

“Now, Bilson, I want your opinion. Where do you think we had best hang this?”

And then Mr. Bilson would hold his head on one side, and look first at one window, and then to another, to consider the disposition of the lights, and carefully scan the picture through a bit of paper which he

had rolled up into a tube, after the fashion of art critics, and reply—

“ Well, sir, I should say,”—and here the elbow gave a sideways jerk,—“ I should say this here spot would be about as good as any you could fix upon. There's a first-rate derangement of lights, sir, and the neutral curtain makes a perspicuous back-ground. This here's the spot for it, sir, according to my judgment.”

So Mr. Brooke, without any vestige of a smile, save in his eyes, and the assistant never thought of looking for it there, would hang the picture in “ this here spot,” and then, stepping back a pace or two, to survey the effect, would say—

“ Capital, Bilson ; why, there could not have been a better place for it. You have a fine talent for hanging, Mr. Bilson.”

Whereupon little Mr. Bilson pulled up his collar, and ran his fingers through his hair, and said to himself, as he dived into the great portfolio after another drawing, "Sensible man this new master of ours. Don't know, after all, if he isn't almost better for sensibleness than the master that's gone."

Poor little Mr. Bilson! If the public generally placed his abilities considerably below the average, his own estimation of them amply compensated for any such mistake. And since, as the philosophers say, our happiness depends on the amount of self-esteem with which we are blessed, Mr. Bilson may be congratulated on the large share which Nature had assigned to him.

But his complacency reached its culminating point at the public meeting in the evening, when the male and female students, chalk

squares, outlines, antiques, naturals, elementaries, and perpendiculars were ranged in their respective departments, and the spacious and classic apartment of the School of Art—so the *Angusbury Chronicle* said next day—was thronged to overflowing with the rank and fashion of the neighbourhood. For in the evening, after the Bishop of St. Olave's had delivered his opening address, and called upon the secretary to read the report; and after the Mayor of Angusbury, in a most able and eloquent speech, had moved that that report be adopted and printed; and after Ralph Jellat, Esq., the county member, had spent an hour in seconding that proposition; and after Mr. Green, the very young curate of St. Angus, senior, had intimated, with many coughs and blushes, that, unaccustomed as he was to public

speaking, and surrounded, as he was proud to feel himself surrounded, by so many abler and more gifted men than himself, he could not think of detaining that meeting further than to observe, in the first place, &c., &c., which observations extended to the length of forty-five minutes,—after all these preliminary performances had been gone through, Basil Brooke was called upon to address the audience, which he did—so the indefatigable *Chronicle* said—in a graceful, elegant, and artistic speech, which was listened to with the deepest interest by everyone present.

Upon his rising to address the meeting, Mr. Brooke, who was received with loud applause—the *Chronicle* again—commenced by a few well-known chosen and graceful compliments to the young lady students,

and he alluded in the most glowing terms to the productions of their—genius he was going to say, but stopped in time, and used the word “industry” instead,—which adorned the walls of that ancient room. And then, after ten minutes of serious, carefully-prepared criticism on the character and progress of the different classes, he added that it would be very ungracious in him to resume his seat without a word of acknowledgment to the assistant, whose labours had so materially lightened his own, and therefore he should take that opportunity of thanking Mr. Bilson—who was lurking somewhere in the back settlements of the official department—for the able and valuable aid which for so many years past he had rendered to the Angusbury School of Art, and which he sincerely hoped would

be given for many years to come. Mr. Brooke then sat down, amidst loud and prolonged cheering.

Had Mr. Bilson been a lady, he would have fainted. But that refuge of overwrought sensibility being denied him, he was fain to bury his face in a new pocket-handkerchief, which his wife had that morning bought and hemmed. That public acknowledgment of merit was a triumph which, even in his proudest dreams, the worthy little man had never contemplated as possible. If the Apollo had stepped down from his pedestal and placed a chaplet of laurel on the summit of Mr. Bilson's carefully brushed hair, his heart could not have throbbed with more delightful emotions. That public acknowledgment of merit dispersed for ever any doubts which

might have lingered in Mr. Bilson's mind touching Mr. Brooke's superiority to all by-gone directors of the Angusbury School of Art. Henceforth, to his obedient, humble, and devoted subaltern, "our new master," was the "sensiblest man ever I seed—fifty times better for sensibleness than the master that's gone."

For Hester, too, could she have appreciated it as keenly as Mr. Bilson, that evening was a triumph. Thrice was she called before the crimson-covered dais, where the Bishop of St. Olave's, surrounded by the nobility, clergy, and gentry—we quote the *Chronicle* once more—of Angusbury and its vicinity, distributed the prizes to those who had been fortunate enough to win them.

Hester was not surprised when her name

was called out for the first time. It was with just a quiet consciousness of merit that she came forward and received from the Bishop the gold medal awarded by the committee for the best original design in crayons; a prize which he gave with a few well-chosen words of praise, more valuable than the gift itself. But scarcely had she reached her seat when her name was called out again, and amidst the applause of the little Angusbury public, the Bishop placed in her hands the silver medal, due to the best shaded drawing from cast. Once more she came back to her seat, and a third time the secretary read her name.

“For the best water-colour group of flowers, from nature, Hester Tredegar.”

Angusbury was quite demonstrative now. It clapped its hands and stamped its feet

with most unusual fervour, as Hester made her way through “the rank and fashion of the neighbourhood” to the dais at the top of the room.

There was a flush upon her cheek this time, and a sparkle of excitement in her eyes. It was not the Bishop now, but the new master, who held the prize, and gave it to his pupil, with a few low-spoken words of proud pleasure, words which Basil Brooke knew so well how to speak; for, if there ever was a man who possessed the rare art of saying the right thing in the right place, that man was the master of the Angusbury School of Art.

Hester knew not what it was that she took from his hands. It might have been a block of wood, or it might have been the freedom of the town in a golden box,

for any impression it made upon her, as, trembling with unwonted excitement, she once more reached the shelter of her father's side. Miss Lapiter took advantage of the tumult of applause, which had not quite spent itself, to put in her own little private rill of congratulation.

"So proud, my dear Miss Hester, so very proud," and the brown bow on the top of her bonnet flapped its wings as if it too could chirp out a few notes of triumph. "I'm sure I never felt so proud in all my life. It's quite a coronation, Miss Hester, it really is, and before all the Angusbury people too. Why, my dear, you will be a star of the first magnitude in the place, you will indeed. A gold medal and a silver medal, and the Bishop so complimentary, and Mr. Brooke looking as proud

as if everything had been said to himself ; and no wonder, I'm sure, for there isn't another school in the kingdom could turn out such a pupil. And to be so quiet about it too ; but that's talent, my dear, always retiring and unconscious. But it ought not to be so retiring as to forget to look at its own prizes ; and I declare you have never so much as opened this beautiful book which Mr. Basil Brooke gave you."

Hester had not, indeed. It lay upon her knee untouched, almost forgotten, until Miss Lapiter took it up and went into ecstasies over it.

"Nature-printed ferns. Why, what are nature-printed ferns ? Printed like nature, I suppose, and I'm sure they are, too. You might almost pick them off the paper, and such lovely poetry to correspond on the opposite

side of the leaf. A book for a queen, it is indeed; and very suitable, too, considering what a coronation you have had to-night. But what is this? This isn't nature-printed, I'm sure, and so delicate that I can't see it without my glasses, so you must find out yourself."

And Miss Lapiter handed the gilt and illuminated treasure back to Hester, who opened it now for the first time. But she did not get farther than the fly leaf, nor, had she sat there for an hour, would that page have been turned. For on it there was the tiniest etching, not bigger than a crown-piece; a woodland stream with flag leaves drooping over it, and one little cluster of forget-me-not peeping out from beneath their shade. In the corner were the initials

—B. B.

It was a graceful, beautiful little thing, every touch showing a master-hand. Nay, to Hester every touch seemed to show much more than that, else why should her face flush so brightly as she bent over the tiny picture?

“Our forget-me-not looks quite brilliant to night,” said Basil Brooke, when the meeting was over, and he joined Hester and her father at the door. And he began to congratulate her, in his easy half playful way, on the success which she had achieved. “But tell me, how do you like your book? The committee wanted to give you another medal, but I was sure you would like that book a great deal better. You are fond of ferns, are you not?”

“I don’t know. I have scarcely looked at it yet, but you have made it much more

valuable to me. It was very good of you, Mr. Brooke, to take so much trouble."

"Nonsense, child! I love to do it for you. It was a real pleasure to me to do it for you."

And then he added, in a low voice, so low that Miss Lapiter, though close by them, could not hear it—

"I wonder if Hester Tredegar knows where the sweetest forget-me-nots should always grow."

"No," said Hester, simply.

"By the brook-side."

And then he went away.

The words were spoken lightly, but there was a meaning in them which made Hester quiet enough all the way home. And far into the night, whilst May slept peacefully beside her, Hester thought over

those words, with the low gentle tones and the lingering hand-clasp which belonged to them. And thinking of them she felt strangely happy.

Meanwhile Jane Fawcet was taking that message to Lellandsbank.

CHAPTER V.

MANY a time and oft Jane Fawcet had trodden the narrow winding road which led along the river-side to Mr. Brayton's house. Many a time, when Hester, seeing that she looked tired and pale, gave her leave to go out for an hour or two in an evening, had she wended her way to that river's brink; and there, in a secluded, lonely place, overhung with willow and alder trees, had watched unseen for Nils Brayton's return from his office at Angusbury.

Yet she listened with well-feigned attention as Hester, who thought she was a stranger

in the place, gave her minute directions about the road; how far she was to go before a little by-path on this side of the Angusbury toll-bar, would lead her across some fields to the Lelland, and thence, by following the river's course, to Lellandsbank. And when the directions were all given, she said,

“Thank you, Miss. I'll try to remember, but I'm rather bad at finding out new roads, not belonging to the country.”

And then she dropped a low, servant-like curtsy, strangely unlike that almost regal inclination with which she had thanked Hester four or five months ago, for guiding her to the Angusbury station.

She waited until nearly seven o'clock before setting out. She had heard, from chance remarks in the parlour, that Mr. Brayton often stayed in town until that hour, in

order to call at the post-office for letters, which otherwise would not have been delivered at Lellandsbank before next morning.

She had reached the river-side when she heard footsteps behind her, strong, regular, steady footsteps. She knew well enough to whom they belonged, and she slackened her pace to let Mr. Brayton pass her. Then she followed him, keeping just at a sufficient distance to escape observation.

This man, who, as Miss Lapiter said, walked as though he could face the whole world, daring it to accuse him of anything dishonourable—this man whose step and bearing were so king-like, who held himself so proudly, whose head was so erect, whose glance was so keen and straightforward. She could pull down that royal pride of

his. She could hold up to him a memory which would make that keen eye quail, and that lofty look seek the ground humbly enough. Should she do it now?

No; she would wait. Better not to hurry. Her revenge had been nursing itself for ten long years; it could be quiet a little longer, nay even ten years longer, if needful, so only at last it might fall upon him in one fatal, crushing blow.

He came to Lellandsbank; but instead of going in he passed the gate, and went up the road leading to the woods beyond. She watched him until his tall figure was out of sight amongst the trees, and then turned towards the house with her message.

A middle-aged woman, Ruth Bennet, who acted as housekeeper and general servant to

the little establishment at Lellandsbank, came to the door.

“You’ll have to come in, and bide a bit,” she said in her broad provincial accent, as Jane Fawcet gave her the note, and added that she was to wait for an answer. “You’ll have to come in and bide a bit. The Missis has gone up the road for a walk, and I see the master’s gone after her to meet her. He mostly does of a summer evening, cause she don’t like being out with herself. Maybe it’ll be thick end of an hour before they’re back; for they don’t mostly get tea this time o’ year afore eight o’clock. Come your ways into the kitchen, and sit you down.”

The very thing that Jane wanted to do. For this woman’s face and manner betokened an honest, outspoken nature, a nature

that would keep no secrets, or be slow of speech, either touching her own affairs or those of other people. Much might be learned, many a fresh light gained, before Nils Brayton, who was such a good lad to his mother, came home with her from that country walk.

Ruth Bennet led the way into a pleasant, comfortable kitchen, garnished with a glittering array of dish covers and brass candlesticks, and fragrant with the smell of sweet herbs, that hung in neat little bundles from a rafter across the middle of the ceiling. Then she placed her visitor a seat in the open doorway, from which she could command a prospect of the "back garden," with its rows of gooseberry and currant bushes, past the grazing lands beyond, dotted over with patient sheep and cows, and

away to the high-road leading to Lellandsbank woods.

“I lay it’s a note from the young Missis that you’ve brought,” said Mrs. Bennet, eyeing the dainty billet which Jane had laid upon the table.

“Yes, it’s from Miss Tredegar; but it was Miss Lapiter gave it to her to send, because her own maid was lame, and couldn’t come with it. Miss Tredegar told me what it was about before she gave me it—a party there’s going to be to the Monk’s Crag, after a bit, and Miss Lapiter wants Mr. and Mrs. Brayton to join.”

“Oh! it’s a pleasure-party. And very nice things, too, is pleasure-parties for folks as has long purses and nothing to do with their money, let alone gallivanting about. I can tell the time when there wasn’t a

pleasure-party gived in all the country round, no, nor a gipsyng, nor nought of that sort, but our young master was asked to it. He was a young man then, younger than what he is now, and them there things was in his way. You wouldn't think, to look at him now, that he'd ever been much of a man for that sort o' thing. But I will say this for him, that if yon young lady of yours is going, he'll go too. He'll none want asking twice when there's a chance o' meeting her."

This was a new light to Jane Fawcet, but she was wary enough not to take it eagerly up, or appear over anxious for further information. She sat in the open doorway, where Mrs. Bennet had placed her, quiet as was her wont, showing little interest in anything but the "pretty Poll,

pretty Poll," of a great grey parrot, which was swinging to and fro in his brass cage by the window. But Mrs. Bennet was too fond of a "bit o' talk" to follow her visitor's example.

"Yes," she continued, in answer to Jane Fawcet's laconic "Indeed." "Yes, and the way I first come to know it for sure and certain was this. It must be a good bit past now, nigh-hand of a year, I should think; for now I come to study about it, I'd been a preservin' of black currants, and I'm going to be agate of some more next week, which makes it come as near a year as may be. Missis was always uncommon fond of Miss Tredegar, and would have her out here whenever she'd a chance; but I never took no partic'lar heed of it, cause Mr. Nils being away so much, it was

sort of lonesome for his mother, and her getting into years as she is, seventy-one come next New Year's Day, if she's spared. I never took no heed of it, I tell you, while one day, after the young leddy had been, and Missis sent for me upstairs to help her to sort the linen, as she used mostly to sort it once a year, and lay out things as was to be used constant, and them as was to be kept for bettermost, as you may say, for the Missis was always a person that was very particular about her linen."

And Mrs. Bennet paused, as if expecting Jane to reply, which, the girl perceiving, just nodded her head, and said,

"Yes. I've heard tell that old people often are."

"You've heard right, too. Young married

folks, now-a-days, don't know what linen is, nor how to pay proper respects to it as them does what comes of a good family like the Missis. Well, as I was saying, she looked out a set o' dinner-napkins, and says she to me, Ruth says she, for you see, being so long in the family, and not to call a common person to start with, for I wasn't brought up to service, only my father was unfortunate and we was forced to turn out and addle for ourselves,—Ruth, says she, there is my favourite set; Miss Tredegar hemmed these for me last time she was here. Indeed, ma'am, says I; and truth to tell they were as pretty as you might set eyes on anywhere, a running pattern of leaves with what the Missis calls a device in the middle; so I didn't wonder at her heart being set upon 'em for beauty; and

fine, too, for that matter, as the queen herself might be proud to have 'em on her table.

“Well, after that she was still for a long time, uncommon still for the Missis, who was mostly full o' talk when she got me up there among the linen; but, after a bit, she set on again, and Ruth, says she, I think if anything ever did happen as that the master should settle, or anything of that sort, he would like this set of linen. Still I didn't say anything, for I'm not a person that's given to words—no, nor never was; but it just came upon me as clear as if it had been a blessed Bible truth, that that there was the way things was going to be. And since then I've had my eyes open, and when folks has their eyes open they can see a good many things.”

But Mrs. Bennet did not see so much with her eyes open as Jane Fawcet contrived to see with hers half shut. Sitting there so meekly and patiently, "a yea nay, milk and water sort of young person, and very noticeable for stillness," as Mrs. Bennet afterwards remarked, not a word escaped her. She was treasuring all up. By-and-bye it would work out into her own life, and into the lives of others also.

"You seem to have lived in this family a long time," she said at last, bringing the talk back again to its original channel; for that possibility of Mr. Brayton's "settling" had caused Mrs. Bennet to drift away to some trifling scrap of Angusbury matrimonial gossip, and Jane Fawcet had quite other business to attend to than Angusbury gossip. "You must have been a long time with these people."

“Twenty year come next Martinmas,” replied Mrs. Bennet, with pardonable pride; “servants don’t stay in their places like that now. And it’s a blessing, too, for, saving your presence, servants is a poor lot now, and it would be hard lines for a Missis to be saddled with one of ‘em longer than a twelvemonth. I know I wouldn’t if I was a Missis; such a parcel of good-for-nothing fine ladies, with their flounces and crinoline as wouldn’t have been allowed to put on when I was a girl in respectable service. But things is changed a vast since then.”

“And people too,” said Jane, for Mrs. Bennet was drifting off again quite away from family matters. “I should think you can remember the master when he was a good bit different to what he is now.”

“Ay, can I, indeed. I should think there isn’t a woman nowhere can tell of a bigger difference in anyone than I can of the master. He was only a slip of a lad when I came into the family first, but awful for sperrit; my! what a sperrit he had, to be sure, I never see the likes of it before nor since. I always said it would bring him to grief, that there sperrit of his, and it did, too. It was all along of a quarrel he had with the Missis, eleven year back, made him set off abroad. She wanted to keep him under hand, a bit over strict, and he wastn’t one that could be kep’ that way, wastn’t the master. Law! you’ve no idea, you as only knows him since he come home, what he used to be then.”

Jane Fawcet made no answer, only kept watching the grey parrot, as he swung about

in his cage, screeching out, "Pretty Poll !
Pretty Poll!"

"He was over proud to make it up with her, and she didn't see as it was her place to give in, and so, though it went to both their hearts, I know it did, they parted. He was away a good bit better than a year and a half, and a sore time it was for his mother, poor thing ! I'm sure if I ever pitied anyone, I pitied her, for you see he's all she's got to love, and she used to sit and pine, while she grew that thin you might almost see through her. It was nothing but sorrow, it wasn't. And if they hadn't had so much pride, both of 'em, they might ha' made it up betwixt 'em afore things went so far as for him to go away. But the Braytons has a vast o' pride."

"I daresay he would have a fine time out there, though," said Jane, still turning her dark face away from Mrs. Bennet towards the parrot's cage. "Young men mostly have when they are away from home."

"I don't know for that. If he enjoyed hisself, he never said as much to his mother, nor no one else, as I ever heard tell of. He left his sperrit behind him, though, he did, and no mistake. Somebody had took it out of him. You wouldn't have knowed him for the same when he comded home from them there furrin parts. And yet he hadn't lost it neither, nobbut it had settled down into a different sort. I don't know how it came about neither, but Missis and me always took to calling him the master after that. He never used

to be nothing but Mr. Nils afore, but he had that way with him when he come home, as nothing only the master seemed to suit. So we gave it him, and he's kep' it ever since. And a better master I wouldn't wish to have, though some folks calls him stiff and proud. But it's nobbut the pride as goes with a good descent and an honest name."

"I think I heard some word about his going away again?" said Jane Fawcet, still in those quiet, measured tones.

"Yes, they've got an idea of late about his being sent off to India, or somewhere else. And when I come to think, it's about time he were shifted off again. I can't make it clear to myself why Government folks is let to be always on the move, and never no certainty about what they're going

to do neither. T'other Mr. Brayton was in that line—I mean the Missis's husband—and I've heard tell they never stopped more nor three year in a place. And it's four year come next back end since we was ordered here, and so I reckon we'll be shifted out afore long. It lies strong on my mind, though, as we shan't have to go—I mean the Missis and me."

"Yes, it's a long journey for an aged person."

Mrs. Bennet smiled.

"No, honey, it isn't that. Missis would go to the world's end with that boy of hers, and make no trouble of it neither, if she thought it was for his happiness; but there won't be no call for her to go this time, if the master gets ordered abroad. There'll be a change at your place, there

will. The master'll none go alone, if he goes away from this here place."

"But if Miss Tredegar doesn't want to have him," said Jane, and her thoughts went back to that evening, not long ago, when Basil held Hester's hand under the trellised Milcote porch. She remembered the looks and the tones, and the gently-spoken words of that evening.

"I don't care," answered Mrs. Bennet. "Whoever the master asks to go with him, she'll go. He has that way about him, has our master, that if he says to anybody, I don't care who it is, *do this*, they'll do it. There's never a man in Angusbury, let alone woman that don't set up to have no sort o' will and sperrit, as dare go against the master when he's set his mind to a thing. And if he's set his mind as

Miss Hester shall go with him, he'll take her, see if he doesn't."

"Will he, though?" thought Jane to herself.

"Ay, and be good to her too," continued Mrs. Bennet; "for if he's got a rough outside, there isn't a kinder heart anywhere, no, nor a tenderer than our master's. Ay, look at him yonder."

And Mrs. Bennet pointed through the open doorway to the high road, along which Mrs. Brayton was coming, leaning on her son's arm.

"Look at him yonder. I say a woman that gets such a man as him to stick to and take care of her, has plenty need to go down on her knees and be thankful for him."

Jane watched them silently down the

road, until their footsteps could be heard on the garden walk. Then she said to her companion,

“The people at Milcote will wonder what’s become of me. I’m not used to stopping out so late. Maybe you’d be so kind, Mrs. Bennet, as to take the note in and say an answer’s wanted back again.”

Mrs. Bennet took it, and presently came back with a note for Miss Lapiter, directed in Nils Brayton’s bold, strong hand. Then Jane Fawcet went home.

“She’s a queerish person is that,” said Mrs. Bennet, as she watched the Milcote servant going down the road. “A queerish person, I should say, and one that knows more than she tells. I lay, she’s been bred among Quakers, and took in their ways, for she’s a wonderful gift for quietness

and plain colours. Ay, and talks as if she'd been used to a bettermost sort o' family. I ain't genteel o' speech myself, but I kind o' knows them as is."

And Mrs. Bennet went to get tea ready for the master and his mother.

CHAPTER VI.

JANE did not hurry herself in coming home from Lellandsbank. She had many things to think about, many plans to turn over in her own mind as she sauntered through the warm summer night, past that sleepy river, and beneath the whispering sycamore trees of Milcote Lane.

It was late when she got home, so late that everyone had gone to bed except Margaret, who sat in the kitchen reading the Bible, her invariable evening occupation. But before sitting down to the enjoyment of her spiritual portion, she had spread a

clean white cloth on the table, and placed Jane's supper upon it, for she expected the girl would be hungry after that four miles' walk to Lellandsback and back. The room looked very bright and cheerful. There was that glow of home comfort about it which somehow the Milcote housekeeper contrived to put into every place which she had the management of. It was a gift, and a valuable one too, this that Margaret possessed of making things comfortable.

Jane Fawcet entered the kitchen in her usual quiet, humble way, even more humble than usual to-night, since she half expected a reproof for being out so late.

“I saw the lights in the upstairs rooms,” she said, “as I came along, so I suppose everybody's gone to bed. I'm afraid you'll think I've been a long time gone, but Mr.

and Mrs. Brayton were both out, and as Miss Hester was particular about an answer,
I was forced to stay."

"Never heed, honey, never heed. You're not a bit later nor what I thought you would be; only you see, Miss May was bad with a headache, and the master and Miss Hester was tired when they got back from Angusbury, and that made 'em all take off to bed sooner than what they generally do. But the time hasn't seemed long to me. I've had a blessed time here alone, readin' and meditatin'. Praise the Lord, He's been leadin' of me into green pastures and beside still waters, he has; and my soul and all that is within me doth magnify His holy name. It's a blessed thing, is true religion, for comforting the weary speerit, and building up the waste places as

sin and temptation makes in the believer's heart."

And Margaret's face, so calm, so almost grand now in its deep content, spoke for the truth of her words. But that was a content with which Jane Fawcet had nothing to do. Far off now all peace and calm for her. Other things than peace and calm must fill the remainder of her life.

"Well," she said, "I'm glad you're not vexed. I was afraid you might think I'd been gadding about among the Angusbury folks, and that's a thing I wouldn't do, for I never was a person that cared to talk or gossip."

"No, honey, you're not; and I didn't think nought o' t' sort. I never puts myself about to think needless evil about no-

body. But come your ways now, and get a bit o' supper. It's a weary step to Lel-landsbank and back, when you've done a day's work afore startin'; and I don't misdoubt but you'll be glad of a bite and a sup."

Jane Fawcet wanted neither; but to avoid remark, she cut herself a piece of bread and cheese, and sat down by the fire to eat it, turning so that Margaret should not see her face. It was well she did so, for the veil of indifference which that face generally wore dropped off by and by, and the flame light sweeping over it from time to time revealed strange passions writhing and struggling there.

"Shall I read to you a bit?" asked Margaret, after they had been sitting in silence for some minutes. "It's a good way o'

finishing up the day, is a portion of the blessed word."

"Yes, read away," said Jane, carelessly. "You'll read me nothing that I haven't heard before, many and many a time. My mother used to read to me out of that book when I was a little girl, playing among the bamboos and mangoes in our place at home."

"Bamboos and mangoes! What on earth does she mean?" said Margaret. "Whoever heard tell of such things in all their born days? I never did. Bamboos and mangoes!"

Jane caught up her breath. She had made a mistake for once.

"Trees and flowers you would call them; but when I was a girl we had all sorts of queer names for things, just for nonsense,

you know. But go on and read. I like to hear you. It's as good as singing for sending one to sleep."

Margaret began to read some of the penitential Psalms. The sad, wailing utterances of that noble soul which sinned so deeply, and repented so truly—the man after God's own heart, who hoped and struggled and suffered, as we hope and suffer and struggle now—the man who fell so low, yet rose and walked erect at last, conquering as we too may conquer, and winning the crowned rest of victory.

But Jane soon stopped her.

"I don't want to hear that sort to-night. Whining and crying isn't my 'experience,' as you call it. I want to hear something that has a spirit and a terribleness in it. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a

tooth, and a life for a life.' Find me that."

"Ay, honey, but that were in the old dispensation. You'll find no such wrathful sayings as them in the blessed Gospel of the Lord Jesus. Bless the Lord, we've got clear of the old dispensation now."

"I don't care what it is, old dispensation or not. It suits me, and I believe in it. And then there's something to match it, a bit farther on. 'The soul that sinneth it shall die,' and 'every man shall bear his own iniquity.' You see, Margaret, I know the Bible better than you thought I did. 'The soul that sinneth it shall die.' It's a good Bible verse, is that."

"Ay, honey, there's many a thorn brake and rough sharp rock in the blessed Word; and when we've sinned, or given place to the wicked one, the blessed Spirit leads

our feet into these rough ways, that we may be sore wounded by the thorns and repent us of our evil doings. For, honey, there's never a worse thing in this world than that folks should sin and not suffer for it. It's never the Lord's people that's let to do wrong without many a bitter tear. But it's none of His will for us that we should always be tearing ourselves against these sharp thorns; and so when they've done their work He takes and brings us out into the green pastures, where there's blessed flowers o' Gospel promise and fruits o' love hanging thick for the soul to gather 'em, and where we may feed among the lilies, and sit down under the shadow of the Beloved. And it's these sweet fruits, hanging so thick in the Psalms, as I want to read to you the night."

“Very well; keep to the Psalms if you’re so fond of them. I know a Psalm that you may read and welcome. I’ve read it myself many and many a time. I reckon David wasn’t on a mild key when he wrote it; but it suits me, it does, better than the most of them. Here, give me the book and I’ll find it for you.”

And reaching out her hand for it, Jane stooped down to the firelight and found the place.

“There, there’s spirit and terribleness enough in that. Begin at the fifth verse, and go on till I tell you to stop.”

Margaret did so.

“‘They have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love.

“‘Set thou a wicked man over him, and let Satan stand at his right hand.

“‘When he shall be judged, let him be condemned, and let his prayer become sin.

“‘Let his days be few, and let another take his office.

“‘Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.

“‘Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg; let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places.

“‘Let the extortioner catch all that he hath, and let the stranger spoil his labour.

“‘Let there be none to extend mercy unto him; neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children.

“‘Let this be the reward of mine adversaries.’”

As Margaret read on through verse after

verse of that terrible imprecation, Jane turned unawares. Before the last of them was finished her eyes began to glow, her white lips were drawn back from her clenched teeth; she glared down upon her companion with a savage expression, which made the good woman turn pale.

“Jane! Jane! what *is* the matter? Whoever set eyes on such a face as that in all their born days.”

Jane laughed a low, husky laugh, and turned quickly back to the fire.

“I was only doing it to frighten you, Margaret. I’m cleverer than most people are at making faces. I used to frighten my mother almost into fits with it sometimes. It’s only fun. Go on; I won’t do it again, if you don’t like it. Go on, I say,” she continued impatiently, seeing that

Margaret still eyed her with a curious, wondering look. "Go on. I tell you I was only doing it for fun, and I won't do it again. There's more to come, isn't there?"

"Yes, honey, there's more; but it goes again me to read it. Them's fearsome words for a Christian woman to take into her lips."

"I've taken them into mine, though, often enough," said Jane; "and it's nothing but what's right, too. I tell you what, Margaret, if anyone had wronged me, I would say that Psalm against them; yes, I would, and put a double amen to every single, separate verse of it."

"The Lord have mercy on your soul, then!" answered Margaret, solemnly; "for with such a sperit as that, you'll never

walk in white through the Almighty's paradise of peace."

"I've never walked in white since I was a baby, Margaret, and never shall. But it's in the Bible what you've been reading?"

"So it is, honey, and it's bothered me these good many years past why it should be let to be there. And no commentations ever I read gave me any light about it, as they don't do about nothing. For if the blessed Sperit thinks fit to conceal a matter, it isn't man's wisdom to go rooting it out. I can't clear it to myself noways, but thinking David was let to put it there to show us that though he was a right good man, and one of the excellent of the earth, he was a man of like passions with

ourselves; ay, and maybe worse and wilder in his time. And it's a warning to us not to let our tongues run before our prayers. That's the way I take it, though as like as not it isn't the right way. But now, honey," and Margaret began to turn over the pages, "let me read you a bit o' summut peacefuller to take the taste of them verses out. There's a blessed portion here in the hundred and third Psalm."

"No, thank you, Margaret, I don't want them taken out. They were safe in long before you read them to-night, and they'll stop. You needn't read me any more to-night, for I'm tired. I want to go to bed. It's a weary way from Lellandsbank. Good night."

"Good night, honey, good night. And may the blessed Sperit set your feet into

a peacefuller track, for as you're going now,
it'll none lead you to rest and quietness
nowhere."

CHAPTER VII.

IF Jane Fawcet heard the good woman's parting blessing, she made no reply to it. Only as she took up her candle, she said,

"You won't forget I've left that note on the parlour table as I brought for Miss Lapiter. Maybe you'll see Miss Hester in the morning before I do."

Then she went slowly upstairs into her own room, bolted the door, and kneeling by her bedside buried her face in her hands. Soon the tears came running through her long thin fingers.

Poor Jane Fawcet! Far down in that parched, barren soul of hers was yet one spot of womanliness, lingering like pale primroses, which peer through the frost and blackness of December, to tell of beauty that has passed away. She was thinking of the days of her girlhood, the days when that mad sirrocco of passion which had wasted all her life was but as a little cloud in the dim distance. She remembered her mother's words—kind, gentle, loving words; remembered them, as in sultry African deserts the thirsty traveller thinks of his English home, with its running brooks and green fields. And as she remembered them a gentle voice seemed to say,

“Come back.”

It was the Christ, knocking at her heart.

Had she opened the door, He would have come in, even to her, so weary and sinful, and would have led her tenderly to a peace deeper far than that she had lost—the eternal peace of forgiveness and purity—the peace which passeth knowledge.

But she did not open ; the patient messenger went away and returned no more.

She lifted herself up, and threw her head proudly back, as though ashamed of her tears. What had she to do with tears any more, except to make others weep them ? Then she opened her box, and taking from it a small portrait, she sat down before the glass, and began to look first at her own face, and then at that which she held in her hand.

No one could tell them for the same. The features which laughed out from the

golden framework were warm with a flush of youth and beauty. There was a scarlet bloom on cheek and lip; the great dark eyes shone with hope; those heavy tresses of black hair rippled down upon a neck round and white and soft. It was a beautiful face, glowing, passionate, impulsive; the face of one who would love and hate with equal ardour and entireness.

She studied it long, then looked at her own. Ten years of bitterness and privation had eaten away its rounded outlines, and pinched hollow places in the cheeks, and drawn deep lines across the forehead. Many a weary spell of work had sucked the light from those black eyes, and made their once transparent lids red and heavy. No one would care to kiss those white thin lips any more, or to fondle the cheeks which

were so wan and colourless. The soul which looked forth from those faded eyes, would neither win nor give love any more; never anything but hate.

That face was not a pleasant thing to look upon, so Jane Fawcet covered it again with her hands. But this time no tears came, only memories which made those long lean fingers quiver and clutch each other with a nervous grip. She thought of the golden summer-time, so long ago now, when Nils Brayton came to her far-off island home; when those fiery, passionate natures of theirs had sprung to each other, and he had whispered to her under the shadowy mango-trees such warm, wild words of love. She remembered how she had bound him by her southern beauty, how she had gloried in him and in his love, how proud she had

been to walk by his side, to feel that he belonged to her, that she had won him from all the other high-born beauties of the island, to deck herself for him, to wear the jewels that he gave her. Ah! that was a proud time when she was Nils Brayton's promised bride.

And then the dream faded. The spells she had woven for him began to fall off. Her southern beauty lost its power to charm. He took back the love and the promises which had once seemed so true. That trance of passion overpast, he began to talk of home again, his quiet English home. And Jane Fawcet remembered how she had besought him, first with tears, and then with hot anger, not to leave her. For could she, like him, take back the gift she had given? Could that fiery love ever change,

except to a hate as fiery? Could she, like the cold, meek daughters of his own land, forget, and forgive, and be quiet? No.

All these memories came so vividly before her, as she sat alone in that little Milcote bed-room, the warm sweet breath of summer night coming in through the open casement, bringing with it many a waft of fragrance from rose and jasmine flowers outside. Ah! but the jasmine flowers of her own home were brighter and sweeter than these; the jasmine flowers which Nils Brayton—how she loved to say that sturdy English name of his—had once gathered and twined in her dark hair. Then she remembered how, after that sudden, fierce quarrel, she had waited for his coming again, but he never came; how she had hoped on, hoped on, thinking surely he

would not go and leave her so, until at last she knew that his ship had sailed, and she was indeed alone.

Alone? Yes. And then her love slowly turned to hate. She left her home, she crossed the wide sea, searching for him, but found him not. For ten long years she had waited; now her time was come. To-night she had seen that quiet English home of his; very quiet it was, truly, a pleasant home, and he was seeking an English bird to nestle there beside him. Another hand was to lie now where hers had once been held so fast. Another was to bear the name which she would have worn so proudly. This young girl, this Hester Tredegar, her mistress, was to be Nils Brayton's wife.

No, never!

And Jane Fawcet clenched her fingers

more tightly together, repeating the words, "No, never!—no, never!"

They were not said passionately, but with the calm resolve of a woman who knows what she is doing, and has strength to do it.

"Nils Brayton has cursed my life—I will curse his, too. As he loved cursing, so let it come unto him. A true psalm that!"

CHAPTER VIII.

“ **I**T was all along of a quarrel he had with the Missis eleven years back, made him set off abroad.”

So Ruth Bennet had said to her silent visitor, as they two sat together in the Lellandsbank kitchen, waiting for the master's return.

That “setting off abroad,” with its issues, was the one dark spot in Nils Brayton's life. At twenty years of age, chafing under the too loving control of his mother, who had a little of her son's unyielding

disposition, he had left home and gone to seek his fortunes, or, more truly, his misfortunes, in one of the West Indian Islands.

His prospects, for he was an only son and heir to a good property, and his introductions, for he brought out letters to the Governor, were sufficient to procure him admittance to the best society of the place, and he was soon afloat on a stream of gaiety which drowned all recollection of, or longing for, the old, quiet English life. His talents made a brilliant addition to the somewhat limited circles of West Indian aristocracy. No ball, public dinner, private theatrical entertainment, assembly, picnic, or pleasure-party, was considered complete without Mr. Brayton's presence. The best houses threw open their doors to him, and made

him welcome to the most sumptuous of their hospitalities.

None so sumptuous, however, as those of the Fossanettes. Mr. Fossanette was a wealthy coffee planter, whose orphan niece, Ginevra, had just come out into fashionable life. Ginevra was a fiery-tempered, beautiful girl. The olive tint which mingled in the scarlet of her cheek, told of Creole blood, and she had the quick passionate temperament of the half-caste. Her beauty and grace made her the belle of the town, and a more imperious queen never drew after her the homage of a crowd of half-frightened, half-fascinated captives. It was her boast at every ball or pleasure-party to add a fresh victim to her train, and never was one so easily conquered as the brilliant young Englishman, whom she met at one

of the Government House balls during her first season.

But Ginevra, conquering, was conquered too. Hitherto she had only taken, giving nothing in return but a capricious smile now and then. Nils Brayton won from her all that she had to give. Her ardent nature knitted itself to his. The dozens of admiring cavaliers who thronged around her at evening parties, thankful for a touch of her white hand, or a kind look from her bright eyes, were all unheeded now. To be loved by Nils Brayton, that was enough. She asked nothing more than that, nor did either of them think that life could ever need any other joy.

So they were to be married, and Ginevra's uncle was to use his interest in obtaining Mr. Brayton some appointment which should

keep him on the island. For awhile all went on smoothly enough. The young Englishman and his lovely bride-elect were to be seen together at all the places of public amusement. They just lived in and for each other's smiles. Life was one long gala-day of show, and gaiety, and splendour, which as yet no storm-cloud threatened to darken.

But by-and-bye the glamour faded. There was that in Nils Brayton, spite of youth and passion, and surface folly, which could not be controlled by a lower nature than his own. Stray flashes of anger and pride began to alternate with the soft glances of Ginevra's dark eyes. The fiery jealousy which glowed beneath her southern beauty flamed up from time to time, and scorched to death the love which had no root in

itself. She was capricious as an April day —now all smiles and tenderness, now dark and lowering as the thunder clouds which swept over her native island. It was such a thunder cloud, breaking in a storm of angry words and jealous reproaches, which woke Nils Brayton from his dream of passion.

Then the true soul within him stirred impatiently under bonds which neither love nor trust had bound. He would be free, and he told her so. With passionate entreaties, and then with anger as passionate, the haughty beauty sought to win him back; but it was too late. The snare was broken. He had been a fool; he knew it, and bitterly he cursed the headstrong, wilful passion which had blinded him so long.

So he came home, poorer, sadder, and wiser—came home to try and lead a new life, to blot out, if he could, by better, nobler actions, that year of folly and mistake; came home that the sea might lie between him and that grave in which lay buried for ever the sins and errors of his youth.

If Ginevra could have done the same—if she could have blotted out or buried the past, all would have been well. But that ardent nature of hers could ill brook desertion and defeat. It mattered not to her that many a courtly knight sought the vacant place in her train, and asked on bended knee for that heart which the cold, proud Englishman had given back again. She had loved Nils Brayton in her selfish, passionate way. He had spurned that love,

and henceforth it turned, as only such love can turn, to hate as passionate.

She was only a girl, but she had the temper of a tiger, and its daring too. She determined to be revenged. When she found that Mr. Brayton had really sailed for England, she packed up a few jewels and valuables, stole away from her home, and took passage in the next homeward bound vessel. Dearer than friends, wealth or ease, was that longing for revenge which had now become the ruling motive of her life.

But England is a wide place, and poor Ginevra Fossanette had little knowledge of its ways. No Nils Brayton could she hear any tidings of when she set foot, alone and unfriended, in the great city of London. Yet she did what many a lonely woman

has failed to do there; she kept herself pure and honest. She was fortunate in finding out decent lodgings, where her little store of jewelry supported her for some months. During that time she sought and obtained employment in lace making, an art which she had often practised for amusement on the island. She earned a living in that way for some years, until the fashions changed, and then she was obliged to turn to plain needlework. It was but scant food, lodging and clothing she could earn by that, but she toiled hard and lived carefully, and managed to keep body and soul together, until the sewing-machines came into general use in the establishment where she was employed. The managers were obliged to pay off many of their hands, herself among the number; but they gave her good testi-

monials as to character and ability, and with these she left London, intending to seek employment in some of the great manufacturing towns. She was on her way to Millsmany, when she accidentally met Hester Tredegar at the turning of Milcote Lane, and so the tide of her life was directed into a fresh channel.

All through those long weary years she had kept her purpose steadily in view. That desperate resolution which preserved her from being drifted into the black maelstrom of London impurity, made her also cling with unflinching energy to the one aim of her life—revenge. She had been wronged—deeply wronged; and the measure that had been meted to her, she would mete back again.

But Nils Brayton knew nothing of all this.

After he set sail for England, he heard no tidings of the beautiful, fiery-tempered West Indian girl, until, glancing over a foreign newspaper in some London hotel, he saw in the lists of deaths that of Ginevra Fossanette. Doubtless it was the dark-eyed beauty whose passionate love he had won, and into whose life he had unwittingly poured such a deep tide of bitterness. All was over then, and she slept well. Yet long ere that sleep, would she not have forgotten him and the ill he had wrought her? For while youth and beauty, wealth and friends were left, might she not still be happy, perhaps happier than he who had to toil so hard and struggle so painfully for rest?

And the wrong was not all his. Like two tall masted vessels they had dashed against each other on the rough sea of

life. Neither was altogether to blame; both had been sadly shattered. Yet one had breasted the waves, and, with many a rent and scar, won back to port again, whence it might set sail once more under brighter, calmer skies. The other, helmless, rudderless, had drifted madly on for a little while, and then sunk for ever beneath the deep sea.

Had it sunk? He could not tell, for the storm had parted them. Yet he hoped that all was well. And since no penitence of his could avail to change what was already done, he sought by a noble, spotless life to make amends for a past so deeply stained.

“When the wicked man turneth from his wickedness, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive.”

Ah! how few of the steady, quiet, respectable people who heard that sentence read Sunday after Sunday in Milcote church, thought with what terrible earnestness Nils Brayton, standing erect and proud by his mother's side, listened to the words. He had turned from his wickedness. He was living a pure and true life. With strong, hearty endeavour he was treading down the evil, and nurturing the good. With hard toil, so hard that it had written on his face the lines of age long before their time, he was labouring to atone for the past. Surely he should save his soul alive. Yet might it not be saved so as by fire?

And now upon that life, hitherto so rough and dreary, there had dawned a sweet new light, the promise of better days to come. He, too, so long a wayfarer, should find rest at

last. That southern love had been like the hot sirrocco, withering as it passed over him every green thing, leaving him scorched, desolate, barren. This was as the sweet spring-time, beneath whose gentle breath the leaves should put forth again, and the flowers open into fragrance and beauty, and life, even for him, become a glorious and a happy thing.

Nils Brayton had turned from his wickedness. Should he save his soul alive?

CHAPTER IX.

BASIL BROOKE returned from the School of Art, after that grand annual distribution of prizes, in a delightful state of mind; pleased with himself, and, as a necessary consequence, pleased with everyone else.

It had been a very successful evening. He had made what the applause of the audience told him was a graceful and appropriate speech, which would doubtless be reported at length in the *Angusbury Chronicle*, with the note appended, so sweet to young orators, "The speaker resumed

his seat amidst loud and prolonged cheering." Then the Bishop had complimented him on the advanced style of the drawings exhibited, and the secretary of the committee had complimented him on the increased attendance of pupils—certainly the ladies' class had doubled in numbers since he took the direction of it; and the county member, who paid the school a visit on the previous morning, and marched solemnly round amongst the chalk squares and elementaries, had complimented him on the order and regularity of his classes. So that knowing as we do Mr. Brooke's almost womanly love of approbation, it is not surprising that he put a red cross against the day of the annual distribution of prizes at the Angusbury School of Art.

Also he had made favourable progress in

another and equally important direction. By that graceful little compliment to Hester Tredegar, which she had received with such shy, blushing consciousness, he had paved the way for a further communication which he intended to make whenever a suitable opportunity should present itself. Mr. Brooke had looked at the subject in various lights, and written to his friends about it, and received their several opinions, and he had made all needful inquiries as to fortune, position, prospects, &c., before he made up his mind that the momentous question should be put, and the master of Milcote called upon for the fulfilment of that promise which he had so innocently made a few weeks ago, namely, to place the attractions of his home at Mr. Brooke's service.

Basil Brooke was not the man to do

anything from mere impulse. Beneath that apparent easy impressibility of nature, which swayed hither and thither like seaweed under a flowing tide, there lay the hard, strong rock of prudence and worldly wisdom. This kept him right, where his artistic taste and love of the beautiful might have led him wrong, led him, that is, to contract an unsuitable and moneyless alliance. So it was with genuine thankfulness that he learned from Miss Lapiter, who was quite ready to place the bright side of the subject before him, the ample pecuniary resources of Mr. Tredegar, and also his expectations from a bachelor brother, a rich India merchant, in the decline of life.

For the more he saw of Hester, the more he was charmed with her. That gentle quietness of hers grew upon him day by

day. As he said before, a little more animation—no, not animation, for that intelligent countenance could not be said to lack animation—a little more effervescence—yes, that was the word—might have been an improvement; but as he could not have everything he wanted, he would take what there was, and be thankful for it. Hester Tredegar was a woman that any man might be proud to win for his wife.

This, or something very like this, was what Basil Brooke said to himself the morning after prize-giving, as, still in that delightful state of mind attendant upon the compliments and the prolonged applause, he wended his way to the School of Art. He enjoyed that ladies' class. It was pleasant for several reasons. He had a great talent for observing character, and the pupils gave

him wide scope for its exercise. He liked to watch the little airs and graces of the antiques—what a ridiculously suitable sobriquet Bilson had hit upon for them—it amused him to observe their innocent wiles to attract notice, their petty envies and jealousies, the spiteful glances they would dart at each other if he loitered longer than usual—as sometimes, out of pure mischief, he used to do—at any special easel. But most of all he enjoyed it because of those pleasant chats at Miss Tredegar's end of the room, those fascinating little quarters of hours when, under pretext of arranging her studies, or correcting some false strokes, he used to get a glimpse down into the fresh, innocent, graceful mind. And that was the pleasure he meant to give himself this afternoon, and it was the thought of it which made him

look so very bright as he sauntered, ebony cane in hand, through the quiet Angusbury streets.

The abbey clock had already struck two when he reached the school. Most of the pupils had assembled. He went first, as was his custom, to give a few hints to the outlines and elementaries, who, as soon as they heard the master's step, fell to work diligently on their blurred and defaced drawing squares. There was no great satisfaction in that department of his duties, and so, with praiseworthy self-denial, he always took it first. Then he went to the antiques, and spent half an hour in straightening Greek noses, curving eyebrows, improving crooked lips, or impossibly ugly profiles, and in various other ways reducing to something like propriety his pupils' libellous imitations of

ancient art. That done, he repaired to the upper end of the room, and, pushing aside the crimson curtains, entered Hester's department.

Miss Jellat was not there, offended most probably because her apricots and plums had failed in procuring her a prize, or even honourable mention in the secretary's annual report. Hester Tredegar's place, too, was empty, though her drawing-board was there, with a few outlines traced upon it, and on a little table close by were some leaves and flowers, which she was arranging for a fresh group. Her hat and cloak, too, lay on the chair. She must, then, have come that afternoon and gone away to some other part of the school, perhaps to get her drawings from Mr. Bilson, who was in the master's private room, arranging them after the prize-giving.

But a third easel was placed under the window, with a blank sheet upon it, and before this easel, idly twisting her rest stick about, sometimes balancing it on the top of her finger, sometimes making a back-board of it, sometimes using it to trace imaginary designs upon the sanded floor, stood a young stranger, some one whom Basil Brooke had never seen before, or certainly he would have remembered her face. Mr. Brooke never forgot faces, especially if they were such rare faces as this one.

She stopped her play as he made his appearance, and drew herself up into a pretty attitude of respectful waiting.

Who was she, and whence had she come? No new pupil had been formally entered on the books, according to custom, and yet that she intended to become a pupil was evident

from her place at the easel, and a case of drawing materials which she had brought with her. But whoever and whatever she might be, she certainly made a very pretty picture as she stood there among the scrolls and medallions and friezes, in apparent uncertainty as to what she ought to do, or how she ought to behave; yet conscious of her prettiness, and conscious that Mr. Brooke was conscious of it too."

"What is your name?"

"May Tredegar. I am going to be a pupil here."

"I beg your pardon." And the new master's usual self-possession almost deserted him. It was a long time since he had been so completely surprised. He was just wondering in what airy, elegant speech he could most fitly address the pretty young

creature, when Hester came back. She had been to Mr. Bilson for a fresh supply of chalk.

“This is my sister, Mr. Brooke. She has wanted to come to the class for some time, but papa thought she had better wait until the beginning of the month, when you take the new names.

Hester was very glad to have this straightforward, business-like message to deliver. It seemed to tide her over the painful, awkward consciousness which she felt in meeting Mr. Brooke again after what he had said to her when they parted the evening before. But if she was thinking of those sweet, low-spoken words which had left such a pleasant fragrance in her memory, Mr. Brooke was not thinking of them at all just then.

This beautiful little round, ripe rosebud of a girl, Miss Tredegar's sister; and somehow he had always pictured her a child, a wilful, petted child, a pinafored darling that could be coaxed with sugar plums, and enticed with a wax doll.

“Little May;” it sounded almost like a baby's name. And yet no name could have fitted her so exactly; she seemed to be just the personification of Spring, a very May for sweetness, and freshness, and beauty.

Yes, and for alternate shadow and sunshine too. For as Mr. Brooke and Hester talked together of the kind of drawing which would be best for her to study, and were about deciding on elementary outlines, in which case May would have been banished to the long desk in the middle of the room, the little maiden broke in upon their con-

ference with a wilful petulance which seemed to become her as perfectly as the tender frost of a late spring morning.

“No, no, sister Hettie, I’m not going to be plagued with those stupid outlines, and I won’t sit with those children. I shall draw leaves and flowers, the same as you do, only from a copy instead of the real ones. And if I don’t draw leaves and flowers, I won’t come any more.”

So leaves and flowers were decided upon; for what May wanted she generally contrived to get. Nay, if she had proclaimed her determination to dive into the most impossible of scrolls and friezes, Mr. Brooke would have allowed her to do so, rather than that the threat of not coming any more should be carried into execution.

He loitered long by Hester’s easel that

day, yet not to listen to her quiet voice, nor to deepen the impression of those tender words he had spoken such a little while ago. Perhaps if words once spoken could ever be recalled, Mr. Brooke would have recalled those. For as he sat there, apparently intent on grouping leaves and flowers, he could, without turning his head, command a view of May, who was bending her golden curls over a bunch of ivy leaves in crayon, only lifting a shy glance now and then towards the tall gentleman with grey hair—the gentleman whom she had pronounced a day or two before to be “very nice.” And when she caught his eye fixed upon her, she would bend the golden head down lower than ever, and seem to be outlining away with such wonderful application.

Yet all the time she looked so innocent and child-like ; and those shy, bird-like ways were so completely natural to her. May was just like a little, half-tamed canary, that looks at you with bright, side-long glances, longing, and yet afraid to be friends ; wanting to come to you, yet not daring to take the first step. If you go too near, it will hop away, but if you let it alone, or tempt it with a bit of sugar—which for May meant pleasant words and caresses—it will come and nestle its golden head in your hand, and sing you many a sweet song.

And Basil Brooke, who, as we have said before, loved all bright and beautiful things, thought how pleasant it would be to tame that pet canary, which had flown so near him, and lure it to come and nestle up to him and sing its little song.

But he must begin carefully, or she would flutter away from him again. When it was her turn to be attended to, and he took the pencil from her hand, and whilst correcting her work—which, indeed, needed much correcting—asked her some trifling questions about her previous teaching, she answered him in a pretty, half shy, half saucy manner, which gave no promise of any friendly intentions on her part. He must tempt the little bird with a bit of sugar next time, and try if she would not come a little nearer. He could tame her, he knew he could, if she would only give him the opportunity.

Hester, working steadily at her drawing, did not see this by-play which was going on so near. But she did not seem to work with her usual energy that afternoon.

The leaves were surely possessed with a spirit of perverseness, and would not let themselves be arranged in the graceful designs which others had so readily taken under her hands. Over and over again she tried, but with no better success. At last she gave it up, and began to do some background shading—mere mechanical work, which required neither taste nor skill, nothing but patience, and so left her thoughts free to wander where they would.

They did not journey far—only a few hours back, to the time when, in the same room, and almost where she stood now, Basil Brooke had placed in her hands that precious volume, henceforth to be treasured amongst her choicest possessions. And she remembered his words of praise, too, few, but so fitly-chosen, a rare and graceful setting of pure

gold and dainty workmanship adding to the beauty, and doubling the value of the gem which it enclosed. Yet not so sweet those words of praise, though crowning her in the presence of assembled Angusbury, as those other words, spoken to herself only, given, as the choicest gifts are always given, quietly and alone. They had seemed at first as words listened to in dreams, too bright and full of promise to be real; but since then they had spoken themselves to her over and over again, until now they seemed like sweet familiar music, the prelude of a whole life song.

With such music, then, how was it that Hester's work wearied on so slowly? Why did her fingers no longer obey the bidding of that graceful fancy to which they had hitherto been such willing servants? Why

was she so thankful when May said, long before the class was over,

“Sister Hettie, I’m so tired of these stupid outlines; let us go home.”

Poor Hester! though she knew it not, the little streak of sunlight which she had hailed so gladly was closing up. Soon she would look forth, and see nothing but the cold grey sky all round and about her.

CHAPTER X.

BASIL BROOKE was not long in finding his way to Milcote after that first drawing lesson. This time little Miss May did not fly away upstairs, and content herself with a stolen peep through the banisters, but she curled herself up on a footstool by the window, half hidden behind the branches of a great fuschia, whose crimson blossoms lay like a wreath upon her golden hair. And she sat very still, looking shyly at him through those clustering leaves, never offering to speak to him, sometimes rattling away in her own merry fashion

to Hester, who was in the room too; but if Mr. Brooke spoke to her, giving him the shortest and sauciest of answers.

Somehow May Tredegar could say the sauciest thing to even very grave and dignified people, and they never thought of being offended with her. Even her little freaks of temper and petulance were so fascinating, that one could scarcely wish her, as Miss Lapiter expressed it, to try to "get over them, and conduct herself like a woman." The very idea of May ever conducting herself like a woman! It was clearly impossible. She could not conduct herself in a prettier fashion than the present.

Mr. Brooke thought so, watching the fair little head, which kept dipping and rising again behind the crimson-blossomed fuschia. Sometimes she would peer out so far, that

he could get a complete prospect of her laughing eyes, rosy lips, flashing golden curls; but when she caught his glance away they disappeared behind the very thickest branch, and only by that merry, musical voice could he tell that she was in the room at all. Foolish, flirtish, fascinating little May!

“Well,” he asked her at last, “and how did you like your drawing lesson? I hope you enjoyed it sufficiently to make you wish to come again.”

“Oh! yes, I liked it,” she said, just flashing her face out upon him for a moment. “It was very nice—a great deal nicer than the drawing-class I went to in France. Oh! he was such a scold, that old master. He was nothing else but scold, inside and outside, and all over. Only

scolding in French one didn't always quite understand what he said. You don't scold at all, but you were so funny at first. What do you think, Hettie," and May turned to her sister, "was the very first thing Mr. Brooke ever said to me?"

"I'm sure I don't know—'good morning,' perhaps."

"No, it wasn't. He said, 'What is your name?'"

"A most natural question," replied Hester; "and very simple.

"Yes. And so I told him, May Tredegar. And then I thought he would most likely say, 'Who gave you that name?' and I should have said, 'My godfathers and godmothers at my baptism;' but you happened to come up just then, so we didn't get any further with the Catechism. Mr.

Brooke, do the pupils all say their catechism when they come to school?"

And May dropped her eyes and folded her little white hands demurely, as though standing in the presence of an imaginary clergyman.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Brooke, just as gravely; "and next time we shall get as far as your duty towards your neighbour, which you know is to submit yourself to all your governors and teachers, and to order yourself lowly and reverently to your betters. Which last thing, little Miss Mayblossom, you have not learned to do yet."

"And I never shall learn to do it to you," said May, tossing her golden curls in the sunshine. And Mr. Brooke got nothing more out of her that evening. The little bird was not quite tamed yet.

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But the taming was such a pretty amusement, he could wish it to last for ever. It was so pleasant to feel his gradually increasing power over her, as he did feel it after a few more of those drawing-lessons had come to pass. He would generally spend ten minutes or a quarter of an hour at her easel, correcting her work, which presented such a specimen of false strokes and incorrect outlines, that there was abundant need for lingering long over it. And while he gave her those grave professional directions, which were expected from the new master of the Angusbury School of Art, he would blend them with graceful little compliments, which no one knew so well as Basil Brooke how to make. And though May did not often reply to these pretty speeches, yet her deepening colour

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and the bright smile which came and went upon her lips, told plainly enough that she loved to listen to them.

Once Mr. Brooke thought he would vary the tactics. For a whole afternoon he left her entirely to herself, never came near her, nor offered by a few kind touches to improve the outline of those wearisome ivy-leaves which she had got into such hopeless confusion. She saw him pace leisurely up and down amongst the chalk squares and elementaries; he spent nearly a quarter of an hour over Miss Jellat's fruit-piece, those everlasting plums and peaches which had been ripening for six months, yet seemed no nearer perfection than at the commencement of the season; he loitered by Hester's easel, praising her work, helping her in the arrangement of her flowers;

but to May he never came. Only he watched her wistful wondering look as the afternoon wore on, and then her lip began to tremble, and a great tear stood in her eye, falling ere long upon the wearisome ivy-leaves, which certainly did deserve to be cried over, they were such a libel on Nature's handiwork.

Hester saw the tears, but thought they were because May could not get on with her drawing. The child had a quiet way of crying when she was conquered by anything. She could not bear to see her sister in trouble, so she offered to help her; but the little spring-blossom shook her head with a petulance which this time was scarcely pretty, being so thoroughly genuine and unaffected.

“ Go away Sister Hettie. I don’t want

you. I don't want anybody. I hate this stupid old school, and I wish I'd never come."

Which tiny outbreak of temper Basil Brooke, sitting at Miss Jellat's easel, heard and smiled, knowing well enough whence it arose. The little bird would soon be tame enough now.

But it was to be hoped, for the sake of the peace and quiet of Milcote, that the new master would not often amuse himself in that manner. For when May came home she was so pettish that no one knew what to make of her. Not even Hester could win a smile or a caress from her. Margaret thought it must be the commencement of an illness, she had heard sometimes that fevers came on with a fit of contrariness; and when Mr. Tredegar,

who did not understand moods and tenses, ventured to remonstrate with his pet daughter on this untoward state of mind, she burst into such a storm of weeping that they were all alarmed. Nor did the cloud clear away until next drawing day, when the two sisters went to the school again, and Basil Brooke brought back the sunshine by good words and pleasant smiles, given more abundantly than usual.

And so the days wore on one by one, one by one. There is an old adage which says—

“ 'Tis good to be off with the old love,
Before you are on with the new.”

But Basil Brooke thought that it is better still to keep on with both until you see which is likely to prove most agreeable. And really that was a difficult matter to

decide. Sometimes he thought he liked sparkling Moselle; sometimes the balance seemed to turn in favour of the still variety. Hester was calm, steady, and to be depended upon. He always knew what to expect from her, he always knew in what mood he should find her. She was not one day warm, another day cold, now frank and pleasant, now distant and reserved. There was a grave, sweet reliability about her. Perhaps Hester would be best for a continuance.

But May's very changeableness fascinated him. There was the pleasing excitement of a game of chance in dealing with her. Yet in spite of this sweet uncertainty whether he should find her saucy or affectionate, shy or confiding, he was conscious of a growing power over her. He had tamed the little

bird now. He could make it sing to him whenever he pleased. If he smiled, May was bright and merry; if he pretended to be silent and cold, she would look into his face with child-like, questioning glance, wondering if she had offended him; a glance so innocent and guileless, that it was almost impossible not to love the little creature who gave it. May was very bewitching, certainly. Sparkling Moselle was most refreshing.

Also he felt his superiority when with her, as he could not always feel it with Hester. He could thoroughly grasp and surround May's nature, there was nothing in it beyond his finding out. Not so with Hester. He could not always sway her opinion now by his, or by his intelligence rule hers, as they used to do when first

they knew each other. In her own quiet, gentle way, there was great steadfastness of purpose about Hester Tredegar, mingled with purity and honesty of heart, which, he could not but feel, transcended his own. It was a question whether she would always sit meekly under the shadow of his superior wisdom, content that his horizon should be hers, content to receive her thoughts from him, to be ruled by him, not in action only, but in opinion and judgment. There was a fine flexibility about her, which could give way and bend, if need be; yet so surely as the need was withdrawn, she could spring back again to her own place, erect, upright as ever.

Then his thoughts drifted back again to little May, flirtish, wilful, petulant May. She had perfect faith in him. She looked

up to his superior wisdom with innocent trust, never daring to measure her own, if, indeed, she had any, with it. He could do as he liked with her—he could make her believe what he chose. Wayward and wilful though she seemed, yet there was no real strength of will about her—nothing that he could not bend and guide with the most complete ease. It is pleasant to be looked up to. May would always give him that pleasure. He was not quite sure that he could command it with equal certainty from her sister.

And what of Hester, whose brief gleam of sunlight was slowly hiding itself away?

The noble and faithful judge others by themselves. The heart that is thoroughly true to itself is not quick to question the truth of another. As yet, Hester never asked

herself what she had received in return for this which she had unconsciously given to Basil Brooke. She only felt that it had not been given unsought; that if not asked in words, it had yet been asked in that unspoken language which needs no words. Hester was very inexperienced in the ways of the world. Had she known it better, she would have measured her giving more wisely. She had yet to learn the lesson—happy is the woman who never needs to learn it—that the saddest of all losses is the loss of trust.

Such was the condition of affairs between Milcote and Rose Cottage when the day of the picnic arrived.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS LAPITER was great in picnics.

The arrangement of a picnic was her strong point, a faculty on which she prided herself even far more than her skill in raising balsam plants, or cultivating choice ferns under tumbler-glasses, or rearing delicate spring annuals, or having her ten-week stocks in flower sooner by a whole fortnight than anybody else in the terrace.

She looked upon picnics as a serious institution in social life; not one mode amongst many of a little innocent recreation, though doubtless that also was a contingent result,

but as an important means to a most important end, namely, an advantageous matrimonial settlement. Miss Lapiter could point to more than one well-established, comfortable household in Augusbury, whose "united head," as the rector used to express it, had become united in consequence of sundry little benevolent schemes of her own, chief amongst which had been a picnic to the Monk's Crag, and a long, leisurely, uninterrupted stroll, contrived for them by her ready ingenuity in some of the quietest of its quiet woodland glades.

Yes, whether it was an almost public entertainment, like that which the county member used to get up once a year, calling for a band of music, tents, croquet, archery, and an unlimited supply of chicken and light wines, or a cozy little opportunity like

the present, just half a dozen people met together to make themselves mutually agreeable, that picnic was tolerably sure of success that had Miss Lapiter for its presiding genius. And therefore the Angusbury waggonette never conveyed a pleasure-party to the Monk's Crag, or to the Castle, or to Lellandsbank Woods, or to any of the eligible picnic situations in the neighbourhood, without the accompaniment of a certain Dunstable bonnet and sparrow bow, which were as sure a precursor of good-fortune, as little Mr. Bilson's "skirring clouds" of fine weather.

For Miss Lapiter knew exactly what to do, and what to leave undone. She had a talent for discerning "unappropriated" young people, and introducing them to each other; which introduction was contrived just on the

eve of a croquet party, or a country dance, during which the acquaintance might be pursued to advantage. She seemed, as if by magic, to find out inexperienced youths and maidens inclining towards each other with the faint dawning of incipient attraction, and only waiting for a happy combination of circumstances to develope the smouldering embers into a clear, manifest preference. And knowing these things, she would, without the remotest appearance of tact or contrivance, send the respective couples fern-hunting, or botanizing, or geologising, as the case might be; so that people who would give almost anything for a quiet tête-à-tête, found themselves, by no care or forethought of their own, leisurely sauntering along the secluded walk by the margin of the lake, where such beautiful specimens of the *Os-*

mundula regalis were to be found; or on that range of crags close by the hermit's cell, where any one who understood striated rocks might study them under such favourable circumstances; or that wooded dell, where the delicate *Lycopodium* was wont to spread forth its slender stems for those who sought it carefully beneath the withered last year's leaves. And though, of course, no tangible scientific results ever came to pass by reason of these expeditions, though no *Lycopodium* had ever been discovered within the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and though no striated specimens had ever been brought back as trophies from the hermit's cell, and though the *Osmunda regalis* kept its tall fronds intact from year to year, that was not of the slightest consequence. No one ever seemed to be at all disappointed about it, least of

all those who had gone in search of these respective natural curiosities. Certainly Miss Lapiter was a very valuable addition to the Angusbury picnics.

And she had taken special pains in the construction of this particular one. She had all the proceedings clearly mapped out in her own mind, as clearly as those projections of Mercator's, over which Mr. Tredegar spent so many weary hours—yes, and, unless Miss Lapiter's usual good-fortune deserted her, to much better purpose. For who ever heard of any result attendant upon those projections, or what possible benefit had they ever afforded to society, compared to the momentous issues which the worthy little mistress of Rose Cottage foresaw would work themselves out from this picnic scheme of hers.

The buttermen, who lived a mile beyond Monk's Crag, had promised to give Jane Fawcet and the hamper a lift in his cart as he came home from Angusbury on Monday morning, and she was to have luncheon spread for them on the margin of the lake, close by that great old beech tree, under whose shade Mr. Brooke had made Hester such a comfortable seat whilst he showed her his sketches.

Mr. Brooke had been wonderfully eager and anxious about the picnic, falling into all Miss Lapiter's little plans and arrangements with a readiness which promised abundant success to their projected end. After luncheon she intended him and Hester to make an expedition together to the island in the middle of the lake, in search of some particular kind of grass which she

wanted for the vases in Rose Cottage parlour. The little pleasure-boat, which was moored under the crag, would only accommodate two, one to row, and one to steer. Basil Brooke was fond of boating exercise, and Hester knew the particular kind of grass which was wanted, so of course it would be the most natural thing in the world that they should go together. Indeed, as was evident enough, there was no other way in which the grass could be obtained, and Miss Lapiter had set her mind upon having that grass, and she meant to tell Mr. Brooke so.

Then, whilst she and Mrs. Brayton rested under the beech tree after luncheon, Nils Brayton might show May some of the beauties of the place. The child had never been there before, so of course she would

want to see the hermit's cell, and the hyacinth walk, and that lovely shaded dell by the margin of the lake. And as Hester and Mr. Brooke would be at least an hour away, there would be abundance of time for a long leisurely survey of the surrounding scenery. May and Mr. Brayton, then, were safely disposed of. There was only Jane Fawcet now to take thought for, and kind Miss Lapiter arranged that after luncheon was cleared away, and the things safely repacked, Jane should spend the rest of the day with the gatekeeper's wife, who would take her about, and be a pleasant companion for her.

So far, so good. Now, if only the day proved fine, all would be right.

And it did prove so. The sun rose upon a stainless sky, stainless as when that other

morning, five months ago, Sally, now Mrs. Bilson, junior, had whistled so melodiously over her brooms and dusters. Not the faintest little ill-natured streak of red hinted at coming rain; not the remotest symptom of clouds in the wind betokened evil intentions on the part of the weather. No need on this momentous picnic day for umbrellas or water-proof cloaks, or any of those preventive measures which are usually attendant upon English pleasure-parties. All was bright, serene, and still, a day to go down on one's knees and be thankful for, as Miss Lapiter said, when she jumped up at sunrise, and, drawing the curtains of her little chamber, which faced towards the east, looked out upon such a glorious prospect of blue sky.

Nils Brayton and his mother were to be

at the gatekeeper's cottage at noon. Hester and her sister were to meet Miss Lapiter at Rose Cottage early in the morning, and then Mr. Brooke was to drive all three of them in her little phaeton. As to the coming home, they would contrive that later in the day, when things had had time to fall into their places.

Miss Lapiter had her own little theory about that coming home. According to her plan, if the weather held up fine, as it most certainly would, Mr. Brooke and Hester should walk back over the fields, and by the river-path. It was not very far, and Hester was a good walker. Then the rest of them could be driven home by Nils Brayton in the carriage, a most convenient arrangement, and one that would no doubt be pleasing to all parties.

So, at eleven they started from Rose Cottage, a right merry party. Basil Brooke and Hester in front, May and Miss Lapiter behind. Mr. Brooke had suggested, slightly to Miss Lapiter's annoyance, that May, having never driven to the Monk's Crag before, should sit in front, where she could have a better prospect of the country. But May, though she wanted to sit there very much, gave her head a saucy shake, and said she was sure she didn't care at all about seeing the country, and she would just as soon sit behind as anywhere else; and Miss Lapiter, who for once was Mosaic in her notions of birthright, had wisely forborne to press the invitation. She had her own reasons, though there was no need to state them, for wanting May's company in that snugly-cushioned back-seat.

May was in one of her bright moods. She had quite got over the little fit of temper attendant upon Mr. Brooke's desertion of her easel that afternoon at the School of Art. Also she had got over her early shyness with him, and she laughed and chatted with such joyous ease, making such funny little speeches, and beguiling them into such fits of merriment, that Miss Lapiter's supply of sparkling Moselle was likely to prove quite a superfluity.

On they went; past golden cornfields and laden apple orchards, by many a green meadow and sheep-dotted pasture, by hedgesides laden with wild roses, and mossy banks from which yellow buttercups, bold and bright, laughed out upon them; on, until the abbey towers of Angusbury were just a dim speck upon the horizon, and the Monk's

Crag reared its black forehead amidst the reddening woods.

Nils Brayton and his mother were there, waiting for them at the gatekeeper's cottage. So was Jane Fawcet, to tell them luncheon was ready under the great beech tree. Miss Lapiter, always thoughtful for the comfort of others, would have sent her into the cottage to rest, for she had had a long walk from the high road, where the buttermen left her; but Jane, with customary dutifulness, refused to do anything for herself until she had attended to her betters. They might want something fetching, she said, and she knew where all the things were put, so that she could get to them conveniently. No, she would wait upon them until luncheon was over, and then, if her mistress did not want her for anything

else, she would go and spend the rest of the afternoon with the gatekeeper's wife, who had promised to take her about, and show her some of the pleasant walks through the Crags.

So said Jane Fawcet, with meek, humble voice, curtsying low as she said it. But to spend that afternoon with the gatekeeper's wife, a bustling, active, house-mother, who could talk about nothing save her children, and her cooking, was the last thing that she had any intention of doing.

CHAPTER XII.

SO they all repaired to the beech tree, and settled themselves on the green grass, round the cold fowl and apricot tart, in neighbourly proximity to the crows and jackdaws, and waterfowl, and other small feathered people, who were accustomed to entertainments of that kind, and frequented them with a view to gathering up the fragments that remained.

What need to describe a picnic dinner—or luncheon as Miss Lapiter called this, being anxious to make it as genteel as possible—with its delightful uncomfortableness, its delicious

irregularities, its saucy defiance of the time-honoured institutions of civilised mahogany and damask? Enough to say that never was there a merrier one than this. Everyone seemed so happy. Miss Lapiter positively ran over with exultant good humour. Basil Brooke was all attention and courtliness, so polite to everyone, so full of anecdote, so sparkling with repartee and delicate harmless satire. The still Moselle and the sparkling Moselle were each perfect; one so clear and cool and refreshing, the other so piquant and vivacious, that the new master was almost bewildered as ever between the two. Even Nils Brayton, who was generally so quiet, brightened up and entered into the fun of the thing, laughing as heartily as any of them, when May let the French rolls career away into the lake, causing thereby an immense

commotion and screaming amongst the wild ducks and water-fowl, who seldom got such a treat, even at a public picnic. No one seemed to have any sort of gift for silence except Jane Fawcet, who stood like a statue at a little distance, with folded hands and demure, pale face; so perfectly correct and servant like as Miss Lapiter said, who more and more considered Jane as quite a providential addition to the Milcote establishment.

When luncheon was over, that admirably sagacious maiden lady proceeded to the more immediate business of the day.

“Mr. Brooke,” she said, “I want you to do one little favour for me.”

“A thousand, dear Miss Lapiter, if you like,” replied Mr. Brooke with ready willingness. “The entire capabilities of my intelligent humanity are at your service.”

“Thank you; then I am sure you will not make a trouble of what I am going to ask you to do. I want you to take one of these young ladies to the island, and gather me some of the tall flowering grass which grows behind that belt of hazel bushes. You will be kind enough, each of you, to get me a very large bunch, for it is to be met with nowhere else but in that particular spot.”

Basil Brooke was on his feet in a moment, and down at the little mossy flight of steps to which the boat was moored. Presently he had guided it up to the low shelving margin of the lake, where some loose pieces of crag formed a series of stepping-stones, over which anyone who was not very nervous might work a passage and embark. Already in imagination Miss Lapiter beheld her little scheme accomplished, and Hester and

Mr. Brooke gliding over the waters to the fairy isle—"Hester's Isle," as it should hereafter be christened.

But, alas! for once in her life Miss Lapiter's good genius deserted her. Mr. Brooke stood erect in the boat, the oars ready placed, the seats arranged, the steering-ropes waiting some skilful hand to hold and guide them. And then came the momentous question—

"Which of these young ladies will do me the pleasure of assisting to fulfil Miss Lapiter's behest?"

A momentous question truly, but one to which that lady was prepared with a ready answer.

"Hester, my dear," she said, "you will go, because you have got that grass for me before, and you know just how to gather

it. Not *quite* ripe, you understand, for then it falls so soon; but you must look for it in the shady places, where it is not quite so forward. And be sure you gather it slowly and carefully, so as not to shake the seeds out, and let me have plenty. We will not hurry you for time, for we have the whole afternoon before us. Miss Tredegar will go, Mr. Brooke."

"Oh! Miss Lapiter," and May looked so coaxingly at the kind-hearted little maiden lady, "do let me go too. I'm sure there's plenty of room for three people in the boat. Isn't there plenty of room, Mr. Brooke?"

"My dear," said Miss Lapiter, with brisk decision, "there's nothing of the sort. Room for three people, indeed! then we may as well send for the coroner, and

have him ready, for there's sure to be an inquest wanted on somebody found drowned. Three people indeed! and the boat isn't much bigger than Cinderella's slipper. Miss May, you must not think of such a thing, for I shall not allow it. Now, Mr. Brooke," continued Miss Lapiter, "pray don't encourage her. It's tempting Providence, it is indeed, neither more nor less."

For Basil Brooke was measuring the width of the boat, and moving the seats to try if an extra person could be squeezed in. And Miss Lapiter did not like to see him do that. It was the very last thing in the world which he ought to have done, and she did not mean him to do it, either.

"Only two people shall go in that boat," she said, with as much dignity as she

could muster; and really when Miss Lapiter rose to the height of her capabilities in that direction, it was astonishing how much command she could put into her voice and manner. "Now, Hester, my dear, don't keep Mr. Brooke waiting. Are you ready?"

"And I did so want to go to that pretty little island," murmured May. "Sister Hettie, won't you let me go? Mr. Brooke, mayn't I come?"

Hester, looking at her sister, saw that her lip was beginning to quiver, sure sign of an approaching shower. The child had been getting quite nervous of late, so different to what she used to be. It was only one more added to the endless little acts of self-denial which the elder sister had learned to do so cheerfully. It would have been very pleasant to have gone to

that green island, and with Mr. Brooke too. But May's trembling lip conquered.

"Yes, you shall go, May. Here, Mr. Brooke, come and fetch her."

And Mr. Brooke, nothing loth, gathered the pretty mischief in his arms, and deposited her safely in the boat, bidding her sit very still, or they should both be tumbled overboard.

The sunshine soon came back again.

"You are a dear, kind old sister," she said, kissing her hand to Hester, as the little skiff glided away over the lake; "I knew you would let me go."

Miss Lapiter was downright vexed. With the most entire satisfaction could she have administered a hearty box to those little pink ears which peeped out like bits of coral through May's golden curls. It was

so disappointing, so provoking. And Hester wanted to go too. She was quite sure she wanted to go, for she looked so wistfully after the boat as it sped away. The pretty little selfish puss! As if nobody's pleasure was of any importance but her own. Oh! if she were the young lady's mamma, wouldn't she give her a good scolding when she got home!

But who could call May Tredegar selfish? Fresh, innocent, rosy-cheeked May, sitting there in the sunshine like a young Hebe, gathering the white lilies that grew on the lake, and weaving them into a chaplet, which she placed on her curly hair; then dipping her fingers into the water, and with a merry, mischievous laugh, sending a shower of sparkling drops into her companion's face. So full of careless child-

ish grace she was, so gay and winsome. No, no one could ever be vexed with May Tredegar, or bring that ugly word "selfish" into the remotest relationship with her bright young loveliness.

And yet. Well, it was very provoking. That was just what it was, provoking. But of course Miss Lapiter must not express her feelings. She must contrive some other way now of disposing of her guests.

Jane Fawcet, standing apart with downcast eyes and folded hands, missed not a single action of this brief drama. She noticed Miss Lapiter's carefully-concealed disappointment, as the wilful child broke in so unexpectedly upon her well-arranged plans. She marked the wistful glance with which Hester watched Basil Brooke lift May into the boat, and, with a satisfaction as care-

fully concealed as Miss Lapiter's disappointment, place her so comfortably, and give the steering-ropes into her hand. She noticed, too, how Hester turned again and again towards the tiny craft, as it shot away so swiftly among the water-lilies. True, May was a picture any one might have gazed upon with delight, laughing so merrily, and kissing her little hands to those upon the shore; but was that all that Hester gazed upon, and was there any joy in the long, yearning, wistful look with which she watched them disappear among the hazel copses of that green island? No, Jane Fawcet read that look, and knew all its meaning.

And then—for she had placed herself where she could see him well, she noticed the quiet readiness with which Nils Brayton received Miss Lapiter's proposal, that as

Mr. Brooke had carried May off, he should ramble through the wood with Hester, whilst she and her elder companion rested under the shelter of the beech-tree. This Nils Brayton, "The Master," as Mrs. Bennet had so proudly called him, who seemed to watch Hester's every look, and with grave, almost reverent tenderness, so different from Basil Brooke's light surface courtesy, to care for her comfort, and shield her from everything that could vex or annoy. Yes, she could quite fancy that if Nils Brayton went abroad he would not go alone—at least, he would not wish to go alone.

Nor did she miss the look of ample, quiet content which overspread Mrs. Brayton's face as she watched those two climb the mossy ascent, and then slowly saunter through the green glades of the wood,

among the fern and heather. He, so tall and strong, guiding her weaker steps over the rough places, pausing now and then to push aside some great cluster of bracken, or wild rose stem, that she might walk more safely. Just as, ten years ago, he had cleared a path for *her* through the more tangled woods of that western isle, and held up her steps through groves of statelier trees, and gorgeous blossoms and creepers, oh! so different to these cold English things that they called flowers!

The thought of that brought a glow of anger to Jane Fawcet's pale face, which for a moment burst through the carefully kept mask of indifference. But it was only for a moment. Recollecting herself, she stooped down and began to clear away the things which lay scattered on the grass. And no

one could have told from further look or gesture of hers how fierce a storm of passion had been crushed back.

When she had gathered them all, she took them to the gate-keeper's cottage, in readiness for the buttermen, who had promised to carry both them and her back to Angusbury when he passed in the afternoon.

CHAPTER XIII.

MEANWHILE Nils Brayton and his companion took their way through the wood.

Five months ago, when, in the flickering, changeful sunlight of an April afternoon, Hester had trodden that same road, a fair broidery work of flowers overran the path. At every footfall she crushed the perfume from wild hyacinths, and bent the tiny stems of wind-flowers, whose white petals lay like a snow-fall all around. Now these were gone. Instead, tall brackens swayed wave-

like along the glades of the wood, sometimes hiding under their leaves clusters of harebell and geranium, whilst here and there amongst the rocks which overhung the path, great spikes of crimson foxglove were held out like sceptres by invisible hands.

Autumn had touched but scarcely thinned the woods. Here and there a leaf blushed rosy at his kiss, that fatal kiss which is ever unto death. And over everything there seemed to brood a great hush and stillness, a stillness which is never felt but in sunshiny August afternoons, when Nature pauses to admire her own beautiful handiwork, ere, with slow, lingering regret, she gives it over to decay.

A hush and stillness which sank into Hester's heart, making it still too, almost blotting out the faint stain of bitterness

which had fallen there when she saw May gliding over the lake with Basil Brooke. For that was not the bitterness of wrong-doing, or the slow, dull pain of feeling oneself forgotten. She had done what she thought it was her duty to do. It was no new thing to lay down her own will that May's will might be done. That parting trust, "Take care of little May, and be very kind to her," had of late involved many a small cross, which Hester took up and carried so patiently, nay, even so cheerfully, that no one knew it had been given her to bear at all.

There was no need to grieve, then, no need for one weary thought to cloud the brightness of that summer day. If she had done right, all would be well. And that she had done right, her conscience told her.

So she laid that little bitterness away, and took gladly the pleasantness that was left.

For after all it was pleasant to be with Nils Brayton. Though no look of his had ever made her heart beat quicker, though her memory held no words spoken by him to be thought over in silence, and remembered like far-off music, yet in his presence there was always a sure steadfast sense of rest and peace, even a quiet sort of enjoyment, such as one feels when the glare of over-much sunshine has passed away.

They had reached the hermit's cell, where the white-veined ivy-leaves crept in many a winding wreath round the rudely-carved altar. A secluded spot—not a sound to be heard all round and about it but the twittering of the birds, and the slow dropp-

ing of the water from a little spring into St. Angus's well.

Hester gathered a few of the leaves, and began to weave them into a chaplet.

“These are like the leaves you got for me,” she said, “last April. How far you came to fetch them.”

“I should have to come farther still, I am afraid, another year, if you wanted any,” replied Nils Brayton.

“How so? Is it true, then, that you are going away? Mrs. Brayton said it was very uncertain.”

“I don’t think it is uncertain now. I expect to be sent abroad some time next year, perhaps in the spring, perhaps before.”

“But you are not obliged to go. If you wanted very much to stay, they would let you do so, would they not?”

“No, Government does not let us have a will of our own in these things. It is something like the old Roman centurion. It says to one man, ‘go,’ and he goes; to another, ‘come,’ and he comes.”

“Ah! And it has said to you, ‘go.’ I am sorry. I am very sorry, for we shall all of us miss you.”

And then Hester added, after awhile, thinking of Mrs. Brayton, who had once said that if her son was sent abroad she would go with him, she would never leave him alone any more—

“But you need not grieve so much about it, for you know you will take your all with you.”

Nils Brayton looked at her as she sat there a little apart; her face turned from him, so that he could not search it for

any look of regret or pain. This Hester Tredegar, who was indeed "all" to him, having whose love, he could be at home everywhere. And he said,

"I hope I shall—yes, I hope I shall."

He might have said more, but just then a rustling was heard behind them, a step upon the crisp, dry, last year's leaves, and presently a gipsy woman came leisurely along the path in front of the hermit's cell.

It was no very uncommon thing for people of that sort to be seen at the Monk's Crag, though the gatekeeper had strict injunctions to exclude them, and by conspicuously placed notices, all vagabonds and trespassers were warned off the premises and threatened with the utmost rigour of the law. Yet they used to find their way in

from time to time over the low stone fence which separated the Crags from the track of waste common beyond, and, when once in, it was easy to lurk about for a day or two, and run the risk of prosecution for the sake of stray shillings and half-crowns which might be wheedled out of romantic pleasure-seekers.

This gipsy was not a favourable specimen of her race; no forest queen of lofty stature and noble bearing, treading those leafy dells as though born to rule them. She was a small, bent, dirty woman, with a bundle on her back, from which a few bits of chip and furze, gathered on the common beyond, stuck out. She wore a very dingy red cloak, a petticoat in the last stage of raggedness, and her wizened, distorted face was almost hidden by a battered

black bonnet. Well hidden, for certainly the less seen of such a face as that the better, for any one who wished to keep faith in the goodness of human nature. It was a face so mean and malignant, that Hester, had she met it alone, would have been terrified; but Nils Brayton was with her now, and with him she never felt afraid.

“Tell your fortune, pretty lady,” said the woman, with a slow, hesitating, foreign accent.

Hester shook her head, and busied herself with the ivy sprays more diligently than ever.

The woman came nearer, and laid a gaunt, skinny hand on the young girl’s shoulder.

“I will tell you what the young and

fair do love to know, pretty lady; only let me cross your hand with one little piece of silver. One little piece, pretty lady, it will not cost you much."

"No, thank you. I don't believe in fortune-telling."

"No, pretty lady, not until I do read your future for you. Ah! it is a great gift to read the future; it is not many who do hold that great gift. Let me tell you, pretty lady?"

"Shall I, Mr. Brayton?"

And Hester turned laughingly to her companion.

"Yes, if you like. It will amuse your sister when we tell her about it; and the woman can do us no harm."

"Saretainly, no harm," said the woman, whose black eyes began to brighten with

the prospect of success. "I will tell you nothing but the truth, and there is no harm in the truth."

"She speaks like an Italian," said Hester; "but she does not sustain her country's fame for beauty."

And, putting a piece of silver into the gipsy's hand, she followed her out into the secluded path behind the cell. Nils Brayton remained.

When they had gone a few yards the woman took hold of both Hester's hands and looked into her face with a long, keen, searching look. It was a look before which any evil deed might have cowered—before which any soiled memory might start into vivid distinctness, like secret writing when the magic drops are poured upon it. But Hester had no such evil deeds to blush

for. She returned the gaze calmly, fearlessly.

The gipsy pretended to scan the lines of her hand, and then, gathering a great frond of bracken from the bank under which they stood, laid it at Hester's feet, saying as she did so, in a low, hoarse whisper,

“Lady, when this green leaf was curled up soft and small, no bigger than a primrose bud, you were happier than you are now. I see a cloud before you, and you must go through it; but do not fear, pretty lady, there is sunshine beyond.”

“Again she stooped over Hester's hand, tracing characters upon it with those lean, dark fingers.

“I see rest for you at the end. The deep sea will give you rest, pretty lady.”

A coarse smile passed over the woman's face, making it seem more disgusting and repulsive than before. Hester recoiled from her. Doubtless she had been listening to their conversation, and had put her own construction upon it, as also upon the relation which she and Nils Brayton bore to each other.

"Shall I tell you more, pretty lady?" said the gipsy, cringing and curtsying.

"Thank you, no; I have heard enough. You can go away."

And Hester went back to the hermit's cell, where Nils Brayton was still waiting.

"I am afraid I have invested a shilling very unprofitably," she said. "The woman has told me nothing after all."

“Because you would not let me, pretty lady,” said the gipsy, who had followed her, unawares. “If this brave gentleman will let me, I will tell him more. Ah! lady, I know much that I do not speak. We who see the future may not tell it all. Will the gentleman let me cross his hand with one little piece of silver? or is he afraid too—afraid of the poor gipsy, so lonely, so far from home?”

“I am not afraid; tell me what you like,” said Nils Brayton. “No,” he continued, “you may say it here,” for the woman was beckoning him into the secluded path whither Hester had followed her.

“Ah! but, brave gentleman,” and she came nearer to him, and still nearer, until he could feel her poisonous breath upon

his face, "I must tell you it alone. Another ear would break the spell. Surely it is that you are afraid of the poor gipsy—and she is so lonely, so far from home."

Nils went. The woman took his hand in her lean, skinny fingers, and bent over it, and then threw it from her.

"That will not do. I must have your other hand, your hand that you do your life work with, brave gentleman."

He gave her his right hand, though it was with no pleasant feeling that he saw her dirty fingers close over it in a grip that was almost painful. As she looked at it, she began to sway slowly to and fro, and by-and-bye said, in a low, indistinct murmur,

"The lines of this hand do sway and

waver as the waves of the sea. You have come from a far country, brave gentleman, and a bonnie lady loved you there. Is it not so?"

"I am not here to tell you anything. It is you who should tell me."

"Yes, brave gentleman," and the woman laughed a disagreeable laugh; "it is I who should tell you. And I will tell you now, that she loves you not any more, this bonnie lady over the sea."

Nils Brayton would have wrung his hand away, but she held it still in a tight, unflinching grasp.

"You are wrong, woman. She is dead."

The gipsy looked up into his face for a moment, then down again. It was a long way to look up into his face, he seemed

so far above her, as she crouched there at his feet, he standing erect, scarcely less straight and strong than the great mountain-ash tree whose branches overshadowed them both

“Dead; yes, she is dead, quite dead, dead long ago, brave gentleman. But the dead can curse. Ay! they can curse bitterly the living who were untrue to them.”

She dropped his hand, all soiled with the mark of her fingers, and laughed again that low hissing laugh, as with a gesture of anger and impatience he left her standing there by the mountain-ash tree.

“I hope your investment has been more profitable than mine,” said Hester, when he came back to the cell. “Has she given you any light upon the future?”

Nils Brayton dipped his hands into the well of St. Angus, to cleanse them from the woman's touch.

“She has only told me what I knew too well before; that my life has been an erring one, and that I must suffer for it. Most people might tell most other people as much as that.”

Hester saw that he looked sad, more than sad, that something had stirred and wounded him. There might be some dark memory in his life that she knew not of, and a chance word from this woman had wakened it. Small need to bring the shadows of the past over a life that was so pure and noble now. With kind words she tried to put away his sadness.

“And did she not tell you, too, that out

of all error we may win to a better, worthier life?"

"No. Do you believe that?"

"Yes."

"True for all?"

"Yes, true for all; for all at least who repent of those errors, I believe they may be stepping-stones, not to a happier, but to a grander life than we could have had without them. Only——"

"Hester! Hester! come quick!"

The voice belonged to Miss Lapiter. She was calling in evident haste and excitement. Whilst Nils Brayton and Hester hurried to obey the summons, the gipsy climbed the rocky path and disappeared behind the hazel bushes on its top.

But as she tore off her disguises, and flinging her battered old bonnet away, re-

vealed the pale face and long black hair
of Jane Fawcet, she said wearily,

“Nils Brayton! Nils Brayton! And we
might have been so happy together!”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE call kept increasing in intensity and shrillness. But bewildered as they were by the echo, which made it appear to come now from one direction, and now from another, sometimes from the lake beneath, sometimes from the pile of crag behind which the gipsy had just disappeared, it was some time before Nils Brayton and Hester could find out where the speaker was. However, they kept answering; and at last, to their infinite relief, Miss Lapiter's bonnet heaved up behind a clump of bracken, followed by that inestimable lady

herself, in a most advanced condition of excitement.

“So unfortunate, my dear, so very unfortunate, as might be expected from tempting Providence in such a slipper as that, with no calmness and presence of mind; and such a climb as I've had up these crags! I'm sure every step I took, I slipped two back; and so how I ever got to the top is a mystery I can't fathom. And so pretty as that blue muslin dress looked this morning, without a spot or a speck, or anything of the sort—though of course your dear papa won't object to another for her, on account of its being an unforeseen accident—or, rather, it wasn't unforeseen; for I knew from the very first moment she set foot in it, it wasn't the proper thing for a giddy young thing like her, jumping up

and down, and not paying any sort of attention to the steering ropes. And the pony out grazing, too, and nobody knows where the gatekeeper's boy is to harness him. Oh, dear! oh, dear! What a tangle we have all of us got into, to be sure!"

And Miss Lapiter, in a dreadful state of perturbation and shakiness, sat down on what she supposed to be the friendly trunk of a tree; but happening instead to be a bed of nettles, she dropped untimely into its midst, from whence only her Dunstable bonnet emerged with the brown bow fluttering disconsolate on its edge.

“But, Miss Lapiter, what is the matter?—has anything happened?” said Hester, who might certainly be excused for not at once taking in the full extent of the calamity, whatever it might be.

“Anything happened, indeed!” and Miss Lapiter made one or two ineffectual plunges, which only buried her deeper amongst the nettles. “Do take hold of my two hands, Mr. Brayton, and help me up out of this bunch of weeds, deceitful as the smiles of fortune on an elderly maiden lady, who came out for a day’s enjoyment. Anything happened, indeed! I don’t know if you call your sister tumbling into the water anything happening, poor dear! And so beautifully got-up, as it was, as good as new for transparency and stiffness. But what a goose of gooses I am!” continued Miss Lapiter, seeing that Hester turned pale, and was hurrying down the steep, dangerous path, “to go and put it in that way; and I’m sure I was considering all the time, as I came up the crags, how I

could turn it about, so as to set the best side foremost, if there was a best side to it, when it was all wet through, and every bit of shape out of it. But she's out, and all right again, and a great deal more comfortable than you look at this moment, my dear; only, you know, poor thing, she has got all her dripping clothes on, thanks to Mr. Brooke's prompt endeavours, who behaved like a hero on the occasion, and exposed himself to danger in a manner that was delightful to witness, being entirely due to relationship—Miss May being your sister, my dear, and therefore united, as I may say, by the ties of duty and affection. But you can't think what a turn it gave me when I heard the splash. If it had been your own self, Miss Hester, that had suddenly been engulfed in the

bosom of the watery element, it couldn't have gone to my heart more, it couldn't, indeed."

"If May has been in the water, then, she ought to be taken home at once, without any delay, said Nils Brayton, quietly. "I will go myself, and see that the phaeton is got ready."

"Just the very thing that I was going to ask you to do, dear Mr. Brayton," replied Miss Lapiter, who was still in a great state of commotion; "and if you will be so good as to look for that tiresome little gatekeeper's boy, who is never to be found when he is wanted, we will have the pony harnessed, and take her home and give her a little hot brandy-and-water, with some ginger in it, to restore the circulation. Only, Mr. Brayton, one word, if you

please, or she'll be sure to rear; whatever else you do, don't touch her nose, be sure you don't touch her nose, for she has the friskiest temper that ever I met with, and having been out at grass so long hasn't improved her temper, but rather the contrary; poor child, and to think of our having set out this morning with such unclouded prospects. But it's human life, that's what it is. Oh! dear, what a flutter I am in, to be sure! And, Mr. Nils——"

But he was away down the crag, and half-way to the gatekeeper's cottage. If Basil Brooke had the art of saying the right thing in the right place, Nils Brayton had the still more valuable art of doing the right thing at the right time.

Hester had gathered sufficient now from Miss Lapiter's observations, which, as was

always the case when she was labouring under excitement, were something like the fragments of a dissected puzzle, to discover that May had contrived somehow or other to fall into the water, but that no serious harm was done. However, she felt uneasy, and would have hurried Miss Lapiter away at once. But Miss Lapiter was not going to be hurried.

“My dear, you must sit still until I get a little breath. I don’t climb up the windy side of the Monk’s Crag every day, at my time of life, under the influence of such a turn, too, as your sister gave me, to say nothing of falling promiscuously into a forest of nettles, which don’t improve a person’s natural disposition taken in that way, however they may act as an infusion in early spring to purify the blood with a

pinch or two of camomile to act as a tonic, as my brother, the surgeon, used to administer to his patients. But now, my dear, if you'll just be content to sit down for a minute or two, I'll put the whole thing into a nut-shell for you."

It must have been a very large nut-shell, though, to hold all that Miss Lapiter squeezed into it.

"She's as comfortable, I do assure you, except the wet, as either you or I, my dear, and perhaps more so. And nicely wrapped up with everything that we could spare, and Mr. Brooke paying her every possible attention that duty and respect demand. I'm sure, if he'd been a brother, he couldn't have been more attentive,"—Miss Lapiter had such a fine perception of the best way of putting things—"as attentive

as a brother, my dear, and indeed, you know he ought, for I consider it was quite his own fault to take a foolish little thing like that, when he would so much rather have had you for a companion; but then, you know, perhaps he thought it wouldn't be kind to disappoint the poor child."

"Yes, it was all right," said Hester, quietly; "but how did the accident happen?"

"I am going to tell you, if only you won't interrupt me. Well, you know, they had been a long time on the island, and as the wind was in the right direction I heard her laughing and singing to that extent I was quite sure there would be no grass gathered for me, and, indeed, nothing at all done but her getting so excited that she would not be able to sit still in the boat, as turned out to be the case, for

when they put off again I could see Mr. Brooke was begging and beseeching her to be quiet, and not frisk about so, and I did the same, too, shouting as loud as the state of my health would permit, which has never been what it used to be before that last attack of bronchitis three years ago next March. But, however, by the blessing of Providence, they got safe to shore—which was much more than anyone could have expected—and Mr. Brooke got out first to help her, and I don't know how it was, but next thing there was a splash and a scream, and she was in the water. It wasn't more than a second or two, though, for he had her out again before either Mrs. Brayton or myself had time to shriek out, which, of course, was the first thing we thought of doing.

“Well, he carried her up the steps, and laid her on the grass, comfortably in the sunshine—which was as warm just there as any fire. Poor dear! she looked rather white, but she soon came to herself, and the first thing she said when she opened her eyes was to ask if Mr. Brooke was safe, which of course he was, and standing over her like a brother. A most needless thing to trouble herself about, and she seemed to view it in that light herself, for I could see she was quite vexed when she had said it—and he standing close by, too; and since then she won’t speak a word to any of us if she can help it. Temper, my dear, nothing but a little temper; you see, young people don’t like to find their wilfulness come back upon them so. But I think I could try to walk now, for I’m sure you’re

all on a quiver to be going, and very natural too, though there isn't the least occasion for it, as everything has been done that can be done."

Hester's sure foot and steady hand guided them down the crag in much less time than Miss Lapiter had mounted it. Yet almost as soon as they reached the green-sward under the beech-tree, Nils Brayton was there with the phæton, and plenty of rugs and blankets, which he had borrowed from the gatekeeper's wife.

May lay upon the grass under the beech-tree. She did not make quite such a pretty picture now, as when, an hour ago, she had laughed so merrily in the boat, weaving chaplets of white lilies, and dashing the shining water-drops into Basil Brooke's face. She looked pale and frightened, but not

hurt, only there was a touch of petulance in her voice as Hester bent so anxiously over her, and began to chafe the cold little hands.

“I’m not a bit hurt, I’m sure I’m not, and I don’t want you to talk to me. I wish you would go away.”

And then she pressed her lips close together, and shut her eyes to keep the tears from coming through. Hester saw she was in that state which kind words or caresses would only irritate. A kiss, a loving look, would have brought down an instant shower of tears. So she let her alone, asking no questions, which, indeed, was the best thing she could do.

It was Basil Brooke who carried her to the phaeton, and wrapped her so carefully up in cloaks and shawls which the others spared. And then he took his place by

her, and would have tried to amuse her in his easy, pleasant way, but May turned her face from him, and would not speak so much as a single word, when he bent over her again and again, to adjust her wrappings, or move the cushions, so that she might lie back more comfortably. Nor would she brighten up in the least, for all his merry stories, nor give him even the shadow of a smile for the tender, thoughtful care which he spent over her. May had got into a very contrary mood again, quite as contrary as that which Basil Brooke had been the means of producing a week or two ago. The only difference being, that even Basil Brooke himself could not win her out of it this time.

So it was a very quiet ride home. No sparkling Moselle enlivened the four miles

of country road which lay between the Monk's Crag and Milcote village. Miss Lapiter, who never professed to have a gift for silence, did her best to keep the ball of conversation in motion; but in spite of her well-intentioned efforts, it kept falling to the ground, and at last she wisely resolved to let it stay there.

Miss Lapiter felt herself injured. Perhaps she was even more to be pitied than May, whose sparkle and merriment had been so suddenly quenched by that untimely cold bath. For May had earned her own punishment, and might be said in some sort to deserve it, too; but poor Miss Lapiter's innocent little contrivances had met with such signal ill-success, and from no fault of hers either. She had looked forward with so bright a glow of triumph

to that picnic. She hoped such great results from it, such altogether delightful consequences. And now there would be no consequences at all, unless that tiresome little May, who had brought about all the uncomfortableness, should take cold and have an illness. Which illness, indeed, Miss Lapiter could not help thinking, except for the anxiety it would cause to the dear Milcote people, might perhaps be viewed in the light of a providential dispensation; a blessing in disguise, teaching little Miss May to give up her own will more readily another time.

Wilfulness was a very improper thing, a great blemish in any character, but especially improper when met with in young people; and they ought to be thankful for anything, however painful and humiliating,

which rooted it out. In her young days she had been told that those who would not learn wisdom in any other way, must be taught it by bitter experience, and doubtless the same truth held good now as then.

Thus Miss Lapiter to herself, after she had wisely decided upon letting the conversation ball remain stationary. And she was so convinced of the reasonableness of these meditations, that she could not help imparting a few of them—though, of course, in a somewhat milder form than she had thought them out in her own mind—to May, who was leaning back so quietly, and almost sulkily, amongst the cushions. And so the estimable lady came forward with a few judicious sentiments about submission, and self-denial, and self-restraint, and the

advisableness of young people deferring to the judgment of their elders in matters of importance. Which well-meant, judicious sentiments May listened to in silence, only giving an impatient twitch now and then when they seemed to strike rather too near home. May thought it was bad enough to have her pretty blue dress spoiled, and the rose-bloom washed out of her cheeks by that cruel plunge in the lake, without any subsequent treatment of judicious sentiments, or moral observations.

It was a relief to the whole party when the red gables of Milcote began to peer through the sycamore trees of the lane. Mr. Tredegar had gone out for a walk, not expecting them home so early.

Basil Brooke lifted May out of the carriage, and deposited her, wraps, rugs, blankets, and

everything on the sofa in the parlour. And then, whilst Hester had left the room to bring some extra cushions, he said, lightly kissing one of the golden curls which had strayed out, like a sunbeam from clouds, through that mass of shawls and over-coats—

“Good night, little May blossom. I shall come to-morrow and see that you are all right.”

To which May only gave another impatient twitch by way of reply. Certainly she was a person of most uncertain disposition—this rose-bud sister of Hester Tredegar.

CHAPTER XV.

BUT May was not "all right" when Mr. Brooke came to pay his promised visit of inquiry next day. She had not yet emerged from the contrary mood, neither had health and cheerfulness returned, as Hester hoped they would return, after a comfortable night's rest. Her head ached, as indeed it had a perfect right to ache, considering the excitement of the previous day; and that was a sufficient excuse for shutting her eyes, and turning away from the window where Mr. Brooke sat. And she snatched her hands back with a pretty gesture of impatience, when he took

hold of them and began to talk to her in that playful caressing way which people always used to May Tredegar, but which no one used so gracefully or so successfully as himself.

He had too much tact to seem annoyed by her waywardness. He knew very well that if he only let her alone, she would come round again by-and-by. It was only a sweet unconscious way of revealing what as yet she would not own to herself, much less to anyone else, his growing influence over her. Basil began to talk to Hester as though no one else had been in the room, and after a few minutes he had the satisfaction of seeing May's face turned towards him, and her bright eyes seeking his with shy, fawn-like glance. Though, even then she would not talk or notice any of his kind inquiries, save by the briefest and sometimes the sauciest of answers,

as short and saucy as those which she had given him from behind the blossom-laden fuchsia branches, when first he came to see her at Milcote.

So Hester was obliged to take May's share of the conversation, as well as her own, which was a disappointment to Mr. Brooke. A chat with Hester Tredegar, though still very pleasant, and to a certain extent enjoyable, was not quite so fascinating as it used to be a few weeks back, before her sister came home to light up that quiet old house as with perpetual sunshine. He liked better now to hear May's playful prattle, and listen to the ring of her clear musical laugh. And since he was not likely to have that pleasure to-day, he did not make a very lengthened call.

“I am afraid two of my easels will be

vacant this afternoon," he said, as Hester opened the garden door for him.

"Yes; poor little May will be a prisoner, and I must stay at home to take care of her. I am not quite easy about her."

"That is only your sisterly anxiety," said Basil; "she will be all right again in a day or two. You know it was a great fright for her, poor little thing, just at the time. But I am sure you need not fear. Good-bye, I shall miss you both very much."

And with a kind, gentle hand-clasp, for Hester looked rather sad, and he wanted to comfort her, Basil Brooke went away.

May watched him as he crossed the grass-plot, striking off the heads of the daisies with that little ebony cane of his; nor was it until the tall sycamore trees of Milcote

Lane had quite hidden him from sight, that she turned wearily round and tried to go to sleep. This slow, dull, stupid pain was very tiresome, worse even than Miss Lapiter's judicious sentences and moral reflections, which had been bad enough; she wished it would go away, and let her spring and dance about as she could have done yesterday at this time. Yesterday at this time. Ah! how far away back yesterday at this time seemed now to poor little May!

Mr. Brooke had said quite rightly, he did miss his favourite pupils very much. The drawing-class was tedious enough that afternoon. Never had the quarters chimed so slowly from the belfry tower of the abbey; never had the outlines and elementaries been so stupid, or the antiques vexed him so with their false strokes and

wretched copying. He could have swept them all away together with the greatest satisfaction, and finished the afternoon by a solitary diet of meditation, serious meditation, a thing which Basil Brooke rarely indulged in. Over and over again, as he corrected Greek noses, and straightened crooked eyebrows, and walked patiently round the long middle desk, putting improving touches to the most hopeless of chalk squares, did he turn a wistful look to that draped recess at the other end of the room, where, upon May's easel, was arranged the half-finished group of ivy leaves, over which the pretty little creature had spent so many impatient hours. He missed the golden hair that used to make such a sunshine there, and the rosy face with its glad, bright smile, that was always

ready for him when he used to come quietly behind May's chair, and take the pencil out of her hand.

He did not think he should have missed her so much. He never knew until then how much May had had to do with the pleasantness of those drawing afternoons, nor how utterly dull and wearisome a thing this School of Art would become to him if she were to go away. She would take all its pleasantness with her, that was quite certain. Even a handsome salary, and unlimited compliments from the Bishop and the committee and the county member, and triumphant annual meetings, and the most unquestioning idolatry from Mr. Bilsom, could never make that School of Art anything but a weariness, if little May went away.

When class was nearly over, he went to the recessed end of the room, and began to examine the sisters' drawings. Hester's first; every stroke of which revealed an artist's hand, so bold and true, yet with that delicate grace which characterised all her work. Upon everything that Hester did, she seemed to stamp the fineness and clearness and symmetry of her own mind. As he stood before that picture, studying it carefully, Mr. Brooke began to think that he could not have surpassed it himself. That was not a pleasant feeling, for no master, unless he has a lofty, unselfish love for his art, likes to think that his pupil is equal to himself. Basil Brooke's love, though very sincere as far as it went, did not rise to that degree. So he left Hester's easel, and went to May's.

No need for jealousy there, unless it might be for May's skill in caricaturing, which was exhibited in numberless heads and faces sketched on the spare paper round the drawing; heads and faces to which she had brought much more application and willingness than had ever been bestowed upon the legitimate "outlines from natural objects," which the School of Art provided for its pupils. May was certainly not a diligent student of anything but amusement, nor an accurate copyist of anything but the perpendiculars and antiques, whose fashionable hats, and enormous crinolines, and jaunty little morning costume, she had here reproduced with laughable skill.

Poor little May! And he remembered her pale face, as she lay upon the grass under that great beech-tree, and the feebly eager

way in which she had whispered, as soon as she opened her eyes,

“Where is Mr. Brooke? Is Mr. Brooke quite safe?”

That was why she would not speak to him now. That was why she had been so wayward and petulant this morning, when he would have amused her with his playful speeches, and turned away from him with a shy consciousness that was far more beautiful than the most lady-like self-possession could ever have been.

It was such a relief when the class broke up, and Mr. Bilson, with innumerable smiles and jerks and nods, had packed both himself and the drawings away. He would fain have loitered behind for half an hour's chat with the new master, for Mr. Bilson had a fine talent for sensible conversation, and

few things were so grateful to him as that delicate flattery which Basil Brooke knew so well how to give. It fell upon his receptive self-esteem like dew on summer flowers, noiseless, refreshing, life-giving. Generally, too, this flattery was an amusement of which Mr. Brooke was quite ready to avail himself. Bilson was a pleasing study of human nature, quite as unique in his way as Miss Jellat, with her patronizing airs and graces, or the antiques who played off their little flirtish wiles with such self-possessed, practised skill. And half an hour now and then was well spent in ministering to his amiable weakness, especially as his devotion to the new master made him a really valuable help in the minor business of the school. But this afternoon Mr. Brooke was in no mood for conversation.

Briefly, and very carelessly, he put aside Bilson's attempts to draw him out, and so, by-and-by, that worthy little man, finding that there was no prospect of success, put on his hat and went home in a slightly disappointed frame of mind.

Basil lingered behind at that end of the room where May's easel was placed. The sunlight came in pleasantly as ever through the mullioned windows, but because that sunlight glanced on no golden head now, and cast the shadow of no slight, graceful figure on those crimson draperies, it had lost its brightness for him. There would be no more sunlight now until May came back.

Basil Brooke had a much finer, more perfectly-developed creative faculty than Sally's bucolic husband, Thomas Bilson, junior. He

was not obliged, like that worthy vendor of milk, to have recourse to external objects by way of aiding imagination when he wished to call up the ideal of past or prospective happiness. Sitting there in the track of the August sunlight, he could shut his eyes, and, without any intervention of external symbols, call up before his mental vision that sweet, fascinating, wilful little creature whose presence made the drawing-class such a means of enjoyment to him. He had but to will, and she stood before him with her sweet, bright smile and winning ways, her playful gestures, and saucy, wayward words. Also he could bid the future into the present, and see a home, of which he was the master, brightened by that rosy, laughing face of May's, and made glad by a voice which was far above music to him now.

Much finer than anything Mr. Bilson, junior, could achieve with visible pot shepherdesses and banditti, though the capacity of achieving it might not possibly make the new master of the School of Art a kinder, more faithful husband, seeing that love is independent of the creative faculty, and may flourish, as in Mr. Bilson's case, in connection with the scantiest of intellectual endowments.

Basil Brooke lingered there long, until the sun went down behind those grey old abbey towers, and the last golden streaks had died away from the uplifted head of the Juno, who stood so proudly upon her marble pedestal, before a "perspicuous background," as the assistant master called it, of neutral tint. And then he sauntered very slowly

towards Rose Cottage, saying to himself,
“I wish little May would come back
again.”

CHAPTER XVI.

BUT little May never did come back again.

It was to no purpose that Mr. Bilson used to draw out those two easels, gather up the needful rest-sticks, palettes, pencils, and crayons, and arrange Hester's flower studies morning after morning, until they were quite faded and had to be thrown away. Those easels were still unoccupied, those drawing materials untouched. Not a leaf nor scroll was added to Hester's design, not a single touch to that elaborate "outline

from natural objects," which had grown so slowly, so very slowly under May's impatient fingers.

And so at last Mr. Bilson, who had a sincere regard for Miss Tredegar—"best pupil as ever came to this here class"—and her bright-eyed sister, who, though never likely to do much credit to the school as a producer of first-class pictures, was herself a picture as perfect as any those old walls had ever looked upon—Mr. Bilson came to the new master, and remarked more sadly than was his wont,

"I reckon, sir, as I may as well shift them there easels away. I'm feared summur's up at Milcote. Miss Tredegar used to be as reg'lar as clock-work, always in her place first, and last to leave when class was up, and it's nigh-hand of a week now since

she and t'other young lady comed. Do you think, I'd better shift 'em, sir?"

To which the new master, also more sadly than was his wont, replied,

"Yes, Mr. Bilson, you may take them away. Miss Tredegar's sister is ill, and neither of the young ladies will be able to attend the class any more for the present."

So the easels were put away, and the August sunlight, coming in through that old mullioned window, fell no more on golden curls and rosebud lips,—fell only on Miss Jellat's plums and peaches, which, however, never ripened for any warmth and brightness of theirs.

And then, indeed, followed dreary days for Basil Brooke, days wherein the chalk squares and perpendiculars got many a sharp word and touchy reproof, and the antiques very

scant measure of attention or approbation ; days wherein little Mr. Bilson entirely missed his customary afternoon spell of conversation and flattery, finding instead nothing but absent replies or almost uncourteous rebuffs, which made him stagger in the belief, once so strong, that Mr. Brooke was “far before the master that’s gone for sensibleness.”

Yet not such dreary days as were meted out to the little household at Milcote. That result which Miss Lapiter had contemplated as possibly contingent on the late expedition, had too sadly come to pass. May did take cold and have an illness, though whether that illness should issue in any such salutary moral reformation as Miss Lapiter had also ventured to anticipate, remained to be proved.

All that day after the picnic, May lay

on the sofa, restless and complaining, sometimes dozing off into brief, unquiet slumbers, sometimes resting her aching head on Hester's shoulder. Then came another night of restlessness, followed by another morning of pain. Then a great shadow fell upon the old house at Milcote. Its people hushed their voices and stepped more noiselessly about; except Jane Fawcet, whose low, meek tones needed no quieting, whose stealthy footfall could scarce be lighter even if death itself, and not the shadow of it, were there.

And one room, the room where the morning sun peeped in so cheerily through clasping jasmine branches, was darkened until those who watched within it could hardly see the pale face, paling day by day, round which the curtains were so closely drawn.

And the physician, a white-headed, kind old man, who had stood by many a death-bed in his time, and seen many a wearied eyelid close, to open again, where?—uttered that ill-omened word—fever. And his face grew graver, as that face upon the pillow grew thinner and smaller, and no longer pale, but flushed with the red fever glow. And as Hester stole silently out of the room to receive his instructions, and as poor Mr. Tredegar's sad eyes asked the question which his trembling lips had scarcely nerve to frame, Dr. Mackay would say just what Jane Fawcet had said up in that casemented room of hers, over and over again, “Patience. We must wait patiently. We can do nothing but wait.”

It was very hard work for May to be ill,—May, whose whole life until now had

been just one bright, sunshiny summer day. She chafed and fretted at first, and impatiently counted the hours which, in spite of Hester's gentle efforts, passed so heavily along. But that was only at the first, whilst yet she had energy enough to wrestle with the strong hand that seemed to be thrusting from her, almost ere she had learned to know them, so much of life's sweetness and joy. Too soon there was no need for art or wile to pass those hours away. They fell uncounted, unheeded, into a past which kept no memory of them. Past, present, and future, became alike a blank to the mind which had drifted into the dim shadow land of unconsciousness. May could no longer answer any look of love, no longer give back word or sign to those who watched so faithfully by her.



Then the feeble barriers of will were broken down, and her innocent little thought-life bubbled up in the incoherent ramblings of delirium. Once more she was in that green islet, wandering amongst the tall grass with Basil Brooke; then she was gliding over the lake, weaving lily chaplets, flinging up the sparkling water drops, laughing in child-like glee. Or she would fancy herself at the School of Art, and she would talk about her drawings, and ask why Mr. Brooke did not come to help her; had she grieved him, that he never spoke to her? She seemed to have no memories but those which belonged to him. No name but his mingled with those feeble, incoherent murmurings, in which poor little May told forth, unwittingly enough, the secret of her young heart.

Hester listened with a slow sense of pain,

mercifully dulled by that other pain of anxiety and suspense which every day grew deeper. But she was wise as well as loving. None save herself watched by May's bedside during those days of delirious wandering. Not even Mr. Tredegar or Margaret entered the darkened room, to carry away from it a single word of that which Hester kept so sacredly in her own faithful heart. Once only, through all those dreary days, were poor May's unconscious murmurings listened to by other than brave and tender sister Hettie. And then Jane Fawcet heard them.

Jane had always some excuse for hovering near that door. Could she not help Miss Tredegar to wait upon poor Miss May? Miss Tredegar must be very tired, and Jane was accustomed to wait upon sick people. She had done it sometimes, she said, in London,

when plain sewing and lace making failed. She had a light hand, and a silent tread; no awkward movement of hers should break the stillness of the sick-room. Might she not take Miss Hester's place? Could she not arrange Miss May's pillows, or give her some cooling drink which Margaret had prepared, or bathe the poor wasted hands which tossed hither and thither in the heat and restlessness of fever? And with such an anxious look she would ask, morning by morning, and night by night, the question which had become like a watchword now in that silent household,

“How is Miss May?”

And listen with a sigh to the oft-repeated answer, which told of neither hope nor improvement.

But Hester was very faithful. She knew

that little May would rather have died than said what she did say when fever's glow lighted up the past, and flashed it back so vividly upon her, so vividly that it broke into unconscious words. And cost what weariness or watching it might, the child's secret should be safe with her.

But if Hester was vigilant, so was Jane Fawcet. Seldom did she fail in any purpose that she set herself to accomplish. Day by day she lingered in the neighbourhood of May's room, about the time that Dr. Mackay paid his visit. And one morning, whilst he and Hester were talking together in the broad casement-window at the top of the staircase, talking so earnestly that they never noticed her presence near, she stole into the darkened room, and chanced to hear May's delirious ramblings. She was scarcely a moment there,

and she glided away unperceived as she had entered, but she had staid long enough to hear the name, the one name, which told her all she wished to learn.

After that she looked more keenly into Hester's face, wondering if sisterly love alone gave it all its paleness; if May's suffering —only May's suffering, made it look so worn and sad.

But she said nothing. She never told Margaret what she had heard. Gravely, meekly as ever she would ask the oft-repeated question,

“How is poor Miss May?”

And sigh as the oft-repeated answer was given,

“No better, thank you, Jane.”

So the days passed on, until September sunshine reddened all the leaves, and the

last of the roses had fallen in Milcote garden. And still the shadow of death kept darkening—darkening over the old home. And none knew how soon the angel who waited in May's room should pass from it again, this time passing not alone.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE last of the cluster roses fell, too, from the window where Basil Brooke used to sit through so many dreary hours, when no work was going on at the School of Art. The window where Hester had sat once when she came to take tea with Miss Lapiter, very soon after he had been settled at Rose Cottage. And he had thought she looked so very pretty that evening, as the clear outline of her face was seen upon the clustering leaves. And she had talked so pleasantly, and listened so intelligently, and altogether made that evening so very re-

memberable. It closed so agreeably, too, with that long, leisurely walk through the June starlight—a walk which stood out even yet in his memory as the pleasantest walk he had ever taken since he came to Angusbury, or, perhaps, for a long time before. And when they reached Milcote, Mr. Tredegar had been so courteous, and placed the attractions of his home at Mr. Brooke's service, not having the slightest idea—poor unconscious man—what he was saying, or to what extent he might one day be called upon to fulfil that most unlimited promise.

But Mr. Brooke rarely thought of these things now; or, if he did, it was with the faint, far-off pleasure with which we remember pale February days when the glow and glory of the summer-time have come. They were well and good in their place, but

their place was not in the present. Hester Tredegar was an agreeable friend—a very agreeable friend, just the sort of person he should like to have for a sister, so gentle, and intelligent, and trustworthy—the very ideal of a sister, but nothing more than that now—never anything more than that. Basil Brooke was very glad that he had waited until all the treasures of Milcote had arrived before asking that any of them might be placed at his disposal. For that elder sister showed so differently now. Like some rich purple dye, which, held to a pure blue, takes all the beauty out of it, making it appear so cold and poor, May's bright, warm, affluent nature had dimmed the quieter beauty of her sister. Apart, Hester was still fair and attractive; but when May was there—

May so ill and suffering now, perhaps dying. If she should die. If that little hand should never be reached out to clasp his any more. If another mound should rise in Milcote churchyard to tell of hope and joy buried beneath. If he should have looked his last on that fair young face. If he should have listened for the last time to that merry voice and the girlish laugh which used to ring like music through the old house,

For the last time! Basil Brooke did not think that anything could ever have made him feel so sad. He did not think that the brightness could ever have gone out of life, as it seemed to go, when, day after day, there came that same message from Milcote—

“No better;”

alternating sometimes with that other and more fatal one, which Miss Lapiter used to bring with such an undisguised tremble in her voice—

“They think she is getting weaker. Dr. Mackay cannot say how it will end.”

And then Miss Lapiter used to bustle out of the room, and be so wonderfully busy upstairs, or in the garden, or anywhere out of sight.

For she had begun to relent as soon as ever May was really ill. All the child's wilfulness and waywardness were forgotten, and only her sweet winning ways remembered with such love and longing, as, alas! we so rarely give, save when they come too late. And May's tricks, too, that used to be such a plague when she was at home two years ago—how gladly would Miss

Lapiter have been plagued by them now! With what hearty satisfaction would she have had her best straw bonnet stuck all over with roses if only May's poor little thin fingers could have stuck them there! How cheerfully would she have left the most momentous feather-dressing, and trotted downstairs with the grey hairs sticking out of her flaxen front, to seek marmalade receipts, if only mischievous little May, lying in that darkened room now so still and quiet, could have come and beguiled them from her with the sweet deceit of old. Poor little May!

But she wouldn't die—nothing of the sort; and Miss Lapiter used to whisk a white handkerchief out of her pocket up to her eyes, and back again, with energetic decision. She felt sure May wouldn't die.

She was young, and had a good constitution, and young people with good constitutions could battle through almost anything—fevers and all that sort of thing were nothing to young people. She had had ever so many in her time, and came out again as sound as ever. So would May. All would be right in the end. She would take a turn, and, as the Milcote housekeeper said, “pick herself up again,” and by Christmas-time she wouldn’t be a bit worse. Miss Lapiter was quite sure she wouldn’t!

Nay, perhaps she might be a great deal better; for, independent of the physical rebuilding and renovation which was often wrought by it, an illness was an excellent thing, looked at in a moral point of view. Miss Lapiter believed that a serious, well-defined affliction like this, in which she had

been brought, as one might say, almost to the borders of the grave, would work a change in May's internal spiritual economy. She would leave off her wild, wilful ways; she would begin to behave like a grown-up person, and awake to the proprieties of life—for life had its proprieties, Miss Lapiter always said—and retaining only so much of her former sweet childishness as might serve to give piquancy to advancing womanhood, she would lay aside the rest as an outworn garment, too small now for either comfort or propriety. And so, after all, the illness would be a blessing in disguise, as Miss Lapiter firmly believed everything was, if only people could be sensible enough to bring themselves to think so.

Even the picnic failure, which at first had seemed such an unmitigated disappoint-

ment, might also turn out to be a blessing in disguise. For when Miss Lapiter, who always looked on the bright side of things, began to turn the matter over in her own mind, she remembered that after all the grass had not been gathered, or if gathered, it had gone to the bottom of the lake, which amounted to the same thing; and grass she wanted, and grass she would have for those new porcelain vases in the best parlour, and therefore there would be abundant cause for getting up another little expedition towards the end of autumn, when May would be quite well enough to be left behind with perfect safety, but not well enough to accompany them, considering the lateness of the season—for of course it would not do for her to get cold and have a relapse—and they would have just the

same party, Nils Brayton and the May-blossom excepted, and that little boat should be put into requisition again, only with much more triumphant results. Or, if the season was too far advanced for grass to be a sufficient excuse, she had no doubt her cousin, the Professor of Geology at Millsmany College, would be very glad of a few specimens of striated rocks, such as were only to be found at the Monk's Crag; and the striated rocks for the Millsmany Professor would be quite as plausible as flowering grass for the best parlour vases, besides doing away with the boat, which, on account of its size, was certainly dangerous, a manifest tempting of providence, unless people were very careful. Yes, all would come right at last, and May would get well, and dear Hester would recover her spirits,

which were sadly below par now, poor girl, and there would be a wedding at Milcote before very long, not a doubt of it. A nice quiet, comfortable little wedding, followed by another home in Angusbury, where she could drop in for a cup of tea and a cozy chat, whenever she felt lonely at Rose Cottage.

Kind Miss Lapiter! Most excellent and best of women! Did ever spinster's brain weave such pleasant, benevolent speculations as those which grew into shape beneath the sparrow bow of that best Dunstable bonnet of yours?

CHAPTER XVIII.

STILL with anxious look and hushed sad voice, Jane kept asking the question—“How is Miss May?” And the shadow which rested upon the old house kept darkening and darkening, until it seemed that not many days could pass before the Angel, who had tarried so long, would take May in his arms, and carry her away, bearing with her so much joy and sunshine, which could never, never come again.

Jane Fawcet, stealing noiselessly about the house as heretofore, missed nothing that

passed therein. She watched how Hester's face grew paler and her step more feeble; how with averted eyes and faltering voice she answered the inquiries which Basil Brooke came so often to make, yet how, when he had turned away, her sad eyes followed him with a wistful yearning look, that told so much of weariness and longing. And as Jane noticed these things, a dark thought crept into her heart, where so many dark thoughts had already been bidden to stay. And at night, when all was hushed, save in that darkened chamber where death and life watched side by side, she would sit up in her own room, and, leaning her arms on the open casement window which looked towards Lellandsbank woods, would ponder over that thought until it grew into a feeling, and the feeling into a pur-

pose as dark as the gloom in which she so slowly worked it out.

They talked of May dying. This golden-haired May, whom everyone loved, and petted, and caressed,—May whose bright face and merry laugh had brought such sunshine into the old home at Milcote. Yet had she indeed brought nothing but sunshine there? Was there no sweet dawn of light which she had turned into darkness? Was it not for her that Basil Brooke had forsaken Hester's side? Was it not May's doing that he cared no more for Hester's smile, nor lingered for any farewell words of hers, as they two stood under the jasmine covered porch, bidding a kind good night—only kind now, nothing more than that? It used to be different. Yes, there was one heart at least in the old home at Mil-

cote to which this little May-blossom, as they called her, had brought anything but sunshine. Jane Fawcet knew that well enough.

And so if May should die. If death should come nearer—nearer, until he had quite folded her under his black wing. If the time came when life, who had striven so long, could strive no longer, and gave up at last—what then? Would it be so very sad? Only one more taken from a world already over-full—a single star fallen from a sky so thickly studded with them, that the lost one would never be missed,—a leaf, just one little leaf, shaken off that great spreading tree of life, whose branches no autumn ever thins. Only that, even if May were to die.

“And is it not often better to die than

to live?" asked Jane Fawcet, as she looked out into the misty August night. Do not grassy mound and sculptured headstone shut down all grief—shut it down for ever? If death, with hasty hand, dashes life's wine-cup to the ground and spills its sparkling drops, it also breaks life's poison-cup, often the fuller of the two. And not to taste that poison-cup, how many would gladly leave the other unquaffed? If she had died ten years ago—died in the first bright flush of youth, when Nils Brayton loved her as Basil Brooke loved May now, would it not have been better? What had those long toilsome years done for her, but widen the gulf which parted her from a happy past? What could coming years do, but make that gulf wider still? No hope, no joy, only the patient waiting for revenge,

after which she would be content to die. And who could say that May's future would be brighter than her own? Who could say that no poison-cup would ever be held to the lips which hitherto had tasted only life's crimson wine? A poison-cup of which she must drink, as Jane Fawcet herself had done, even to the dregs.

A little thing would make her die now, a very little thing. The least withdrawal of that watchful care which Hester gave would end the conflict, and leave the victory to death. And of the great hereafter which lay beyond? Who had ever come back to say that any such hereafter girded in the sin and suffering of this life,—to say that souls could shiver there in remorse for evil deeds done here, or that any spectre of memory could haunt its infinite gloom? Would not

death—death which is oftentimes more merciful than life, cover with an eternal silence all that she, the poor forsaken, deserted woman had done, or could do?

Then if May should die. Jane Fawcet knew well enough what would happen then. Basil Brooke would come back again to his old love. Little doubt of that. She had watched his going out and coming in more closely than anyone thought. Many and many a time had she stood on the staircase landing, overlooking the glass door which opened out of Milcote parlour into the wide old fashioned hall, and by the pleasant lamp-light she had seen him talking to Hester in those not far-off spring nights, when her cheek was fresher and her smile brighter than now. She had heard his low whispered words, and watched his lingering look when they

had parted under that trellised porch, words and looks that were never given now, because when May came home Hester lost her power to charm. Basil Brooke loved morning better than evening, Aurora's rosy flush far better than the sweet calm stillness of vespers.

Yes, she knew him well, this graceful, winning Basil Brooke. She could sound his nature, changeable yet affectionate, easily stirred, as easily quieted; not capable of being moved to earnest emotion, yet ever seeking someone on whom to spend the sparkling overflow of his love. If May died, he would mourn for her a little while, he would weep for her a few days, remember her a few weeks, and then he would go back to what had contented him before. He would marry Hester, and be very kind to her, make her quite happy, after an ordinary surface fashion, the

fashion which suits most men and women.

But if Basil Brooke married Hester, Nils Brayton's life would be spoiled. That was the thought which lay beyond the other thought. And what had Jane Fawcet to do but spoil that life, spoil it alone if she could, but if not, then spoil others with it? He had wrought evil enough for her; he had turned her life into gall and bitterness; should his be altogether untouched? She looking only into gloom, should his face be turned towards the sunshine? Was there any sort of right, any sort of justice in that?—that one should forget and be happy, that another should be forgotten and perish?

No, never.

These were the thoughts that crept into Jane Fawcet's heart, not without welcome, as night after night, with pale face and bent

brows, she sat in that little room of hers, looking out into the August gloom. And beneath her, in May's darkened chamber, Hester watched while two angels strove for right to place the signet of life or death on those poor wasted features, through which had once looked forth the glory and the brightness of a human soul.

CHAPTER XIX.

IT was not for long that Hester needed to guard the darkened room so carefully. Those feverish murmurings ceased at last, overflowed by the dull stupor of unconsciousness. May had reached the deep waters now, which break upon the shores of the silent land. Every wave was bearing her nearer and nearer to that haven from which there is no return any more to the toil and tumult of life. Those who loved her best, gathered round her, waiting patiently for the end, which could not be far off.

Only a few days, the kind old doctor said,

as he looked upon the shrunken face, over which even now the shadow of death was creeping; only a few days, and then, perhaps without one word of farewell, one single look of love on those whose light and sunshine she had always been, the soul would flit away to its own place.

Poor little May!—three months ago so full of life! Who could think, to look upon those dull glazing eyes, that they had ever flashed and sparkled with childish merriment? Who could think those parched lips, that gave no more reply to the kisses of unavailing love, had ever been curled into rosy smiles, or lifted for the fond caress, which never seemed so fitly spent as upon little May? Death was very cruel to take her, so young, so fair. And not to take her and her loveliness together, but to

snatch the beauty and the love first, and leave the poor wasted form there awhile, to grieve them with its hopeless suffering, ere that too was taken, and nothing left but remembrance. Almost better had she sunk beneath the still waters of the lake to rise again no more, and so the last look she left in their memories had been one of joy and brightness.

Only a few days, Dr. Mackay said, unless she could sleep. If only the torpor would pass away, and those heavy eyelids close in natural slumber, all might be well. Slowly, painfully, but still surely, she might win back to strength again. And how they prayed for it only those know who have seen all the brightness of their lives setting for ever behind Death's dark river.

At last it came, the gentle sleep waited

for so patiently, prayed for so almost hopelessly,—sleep closing up the tired eyes, smoothing from the pale face its expression of dumb, unconscious pain. May slept. And they must guard that sleep, for on it life or death depended. If she could be kept perfectly quiet for a few hours, she would wake with new life; but if an unexpected sound or footstep startled her, the waking would only be to death.

Dr. Mackay beckoned Hester out of the room to tell her this, and then, leaving her to keep her solemn watch, went down to caution Mr. Tredegar and Margaret, who were waiting to hear his opinion.

“Praise the Lord for it,” murmured the honest old housekeeper, stealing quietly back to the kitchen, where Jane Fawcet was sitting with her sewing work. “I’ve put up

many a prayer for her, as if it was the Lord's will she might be raised up again to give thanks at the remembrance of his goodness. It's a terrible thing, is death, come when it may; but it passes everything for terribleness when it lays hold on them as hasn't experienced a true change of heart; and that's what I'm afeared the dear young lady, bless her, hasn't been led to yet. And that's why she's been laid on my mind so, that the Lord would draw out his tender mercy to her in the land of the living."

"What's the use of praying?" said Jane. "If she's got to die she will die, whether you pray or let it alone."

"No, no, honey," and Margaret's face brightened with a trustful smile—a smile which even the shadow of death could not

darken. "The blessed book doesn't teach us that sort o' doctrine. St. James says that the prayer of faith shall save the sick; and wasn't fifteen year added to King Hezekiah's life by reason of prayer, when it almost seemed as if death had shutten its mouth on him? No, honey, prayer's a strong hand, and many's the time it's been permitted to turn away the last enemy from the Lord's people."

"I don't believe it. Everything in this world is settled just how it's to be, and no praying of ours can change it. What's the meaning of God working all things according to the counsel of his own will? You see I'm a good Bible scholar, Margaret; and then there's something else about eternal purpose, purposed before the foundation of the world."

“Yes, honey, there’s many a dead blank wall, even in the blessed word, for foolish folks to run up against and lame themselves. But I don’t see the sense of knocking one’s head on a blank wall, when the golden gate of promise, ‘Ask and ye shall receive,’ stands wide open for simple faith to walk right into. Ay, and when we’ve got the key of that gate, we may go in and out and find pasture, and never hunger no more. And if you’ve ever been drawn out in the grace of supplication yourself, you’ll know that there was never a prayer put up in the blessed Saviour’s name, but brought a blessing down along with it; happen not just the exact blessing we looked for to get, for the Lord’s ways isn’t our ways, and many a thing that we ask for with strong crying and tears would

be nothing else but a curse to us if we was let to get it; but if only we pray with a putting under of our own little wills to God's great will, and trusten him to give us just what's best, there'll come into our souls a sweet peace, like the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. And I take it as this is a token for good, and it may be the Lord's purpose to raise her up again, the darling."

"Is Miss May better, then?" asked Jane, still working steadily on. "I thought Dr. Mackay said, a day or two back, that there wasn't much of a chance for her."

"I don't know that she's to call better yet, but she's just gone off into a nat'ral sleep, and the doctor says if she can be kept still for a bit, she'll maybe wake up for

good. Maybe after all she'll be raised up to lead a new life; for though she's as full of sweetness, bless her, as the grass plot's full of daisies in summer-time, yet I don't feel it laid upon my mind that she's got a saving change yet. You see, honey, it isn't sweetness o' nat'ral disposition as fits anyone for the blessed company of the redeemed in heaven. It's only the spotless robe of Christ's righteousness as can do that."

"Well, well," and Jane gave her work an impatient twitch. Margaret's words never fell on stonier ground than when spoken to that quiet, meek-looking girl. "But if she wakes up, what then? I mean if she wakes up of a sudden."

"The doctor says it'll be to death if she does. And so we must whisht and keep

the house still. They're queer things, is fevers. I've seed two or three in my time. I had a sister-in-law was took off with one, better nor ten year back, when I lived abroad with the Master and Missis, and it finished her just when she'd got to the same pass as Miss May, bless her, has come to, now. The doctor said we was to keep her still, and then maybe she'd have a chance to come round; but, you see, being a poor woman, and a lot of childer, and nobody but a neighbour, who was nigh-hand as deaf as a post, to look after 'em, she got roused up afore the time, and then she just tewed about a bit, and died afore her husband could be sent for home from his work to say good-bye to her. Poor folks hasn't that chance to get better as rich ones has. Now, you see, there's nothing

to hinder this house being kept as still as death, while such time as Miss May wakens natural."

"But if anything was to happen to wake her, she would maybe die just like a poor woman."

"Yes, honey, the doctor says so."

After that there was a long silence in the kitchen. Silence, at least, between the two women, though the crickets were chirping loudly, and now and then there was a sharp clicking sound, which, to a superstitious person, might have seemed like the death-watch, giving warning of what was about to happen in the old house at Mincote.

Then Jane laid down her sewing.

"I'll go into the garden a bit, Margaret," she said; "I have a feeling in my throat

as if my cough was going to come on. It does come on unawares sometimes, and then, if I had to give my life for it, I can't help making noise enough to wake a corpse."

"Ay, honey, you'd best go your ways if there's a chance of that. I never heard anything like that cough of yours, it sounds like a trumpet over the house, 'specially of a night, when things is still all about. And this here house is a terrible place for noise. I think it's the long passages carries the sound about. You'll do well to take a turn round among the lilac bushes while it works off."

"She's a thoughtful girl is yon," said Margaret to herself, as Jane Fawcet lifted the latch and crept noiselessly out into the garden. "I never had to do with a better

servant, nor one that knew her place so well. It would be a great load off my mind if she could get her feet set into the way of peace, and serve her Master in heaven as well as she serves her master on earth. But she's in the Lord's hands, and maybe He's got a purpose of mercy for her, though time hasn't come yet for Him to work in her all the good pleasure of his power."

By-and-by Margaret laid down her work and closed her eyes. Then her lips began to move, and a few low-spoken whispers broke the deep stillness of the room. She was praying for the dear child May, upon whom the shadow of death rested, that that shadow might pass away, and life's sunshine warm her back to strength and beauty. Also for the quiet, pale-faced woman, her

fellow-servant, over whose soul—though Margaret knew it not—lay a shadow deeper and blacker than any which death can bring.

CHAPTER XX.

JANE FAWCET sauntered up and down the grass in front of the house. Overhead was the dusky gloom of twilight, uncheered by a single star. Gloom only, not darkness, for there was light enough yet to distinguish the outline of the rambling, many gabled house, and to see that window, with its white blinds closely drawn, behind which Hester was keeping watch over May's fateful slumber—that slumber which might so easily, so very easily, be ended. And what then?

Then May would die. And if she did die, would it be so very sad?

The little black thought had deepened into a feeling, the feeling had strengthened into a purpose, the purpose only wanted shaping into an action, and for that action the time was at hand. May's life was in Jane Fawcet's hands now, not to end it by steel or poison, but by a weapon which should leave no deadly trace, nor tell any tale of the malice which had wielded it. All she had to do was to steal quietly up to the garden-door, open it, and then leave it to clash back again, as it always did when left open, with a noise which woke all the echoes of the old house. No one need know that she had done it. No one would suspect her. She could steal quietly back into the kitchen again, and the next gust of wind would do all that had to be done.

She went to the door, keeping on the soft grass all the way, lest the sound of her footsteps on the gravel-walk should be heard by Mr. Tredegar, who was in his study just above.

What of Mr. Tredegar? It would be a great trouble to him if May were to die. The child's memory would stay longer in his heart than in Basil Brooke's. Jane Fawcet had watched him many a time, since May began to be ill, walking up and down the garden with sad proud face and faltering step, to which grief seemed to have added the feebleness which only age should bring. And how he would sit for hours together in the parlour, trying to look unconcerned; or if she entered the room, opening his great book and appearing to read as if nothing could reach him, the stern, proud master of Milcote.

But when she crept quietly up the staircase and looked down from that landing through the glass door, there was no more reading going on ; the grey head was bent over clasped hands that were sometimes wet with tears. Jane had seen them shining in the lamplight. She knew they were tears.

Yet should she shrink from her purpose for any thought of him ? He had never done anything to make her care for him. Cold, reserved, and distant, he had shown no interest in the poor servant-girl, who was left alone to toil and struggle for herself in a world where bread is so hard to win. He had never asked her of her past life, whether it had been sweet or bitter ; never by kind word or gentle look showed that she was other in his estimation than a machine to keep the house in order, dust his books, make his fires, get his meals

ready, take his wages and be content. No, she need not pause for any thought of him.

Her hand was on the latch, but dropped again. A single little white flower had fallen upon it, from the jasmine tree which trailed over the porch.

That was May's favourite tree, whose star-like flowers were shining now so whitely through the gloom. May, whose trembling little thread of life she was going to break. May used to be kind to her, never a hasty word had she listened to from May. Once the child had given her some of those jasmine flowers to put in her room, because she noticed that whenever Jane Fawcet passed them on her way to the gate, she always turned and looked at them; and May thought perhaps when she was a girl, such flowers might have grown round her cottage-door, perhaps been

gathered to scatter on her mother's grave. It was kind of May to think of her. She could not repay her so. She would not lift the latch just yet.

But she might think about it a little longer. There was no need to hurry. May had not slept an hour. When that twilight had deepened into night, black night, there would yet be time.

So she turned and walked up and down the grass plot, in the shadow of the house. All was so still, death was so near. With such a moaning sound the wind came creeping up Milcote Lane. With such low, guilty voices the sycamore leaves seemed to whisper together as it passed over them. She could almost fancy they spoke to her, saying—

“There is time yet; there is time yet.”

Still she lingered there, pausing at every turn to look at the white jasmine flowers.

Not the whitest nor the sweetest she had ever seen. Not for beauty to equal those which starred the verandah of her old home in that far away western island ; those which Nils Brayton had gathered once and fastened in her hair. Nils Brayton who had been false to her. Nils Brayton whose life she would give her own to curse. And why not May's too ?

When the thought of Nils Brayton came into her heart, all thought of tenderness or pity drifted out of it, like young buds before an east wind. Once again she went to the door, this time nothing but pale resolution in her face. She was only giving to May that which she would gladly have taken herself ten years ago—freedom from a future in which there might be more of sorrow than joy.

Yet again she stayed. A step was heard far down the lane. Then the clinking of milk-pails. Thomas Bilson was coming with the milk.

It was many and many a day since he had come, never since before May began to be ill. He had sprained his ankle, and Sally had been obliged to carry the milk round herself. Sally liked coming to Milcote. It was the last house she called at, and she had plenty of time for a cozy chat with Margaret at the kitchen door. Sally never used to knock. She knew that door-handle well enough; and if, when she lifted it, no one was within, she would go to the cupboard and get out the basins and fill them, and then set them away, just as in the old time, when she belonged to the place. But Thomas never stayed to

gossip. He was a very reserved, silent young man. With just a single vigorous ring he used to rouse Margaret from her meditations; then he laded out the stipulated quantity of milk, with a little over, for honour's sake, perhaps; and after a brief observation on the state of the weather, took up his pails and trudged away home again.

It was Thomas who came now, Jane Fawcet knew that by his halting step in the lane. Only a few minutes more, and unless she stopped him, there would be a ring at that kitchen door, loud enough to wake the seven sleepers. So the deed would be done, and by no doing of hers. No one could blame Thomas Bilson for ringing the bell, as he had always been accustomed to ring it ever since he began

to come to the house. No one could blame her for not stopping him, for how could they know that in that gloom she had seen him come up the walk?

She crouched behind the shadow of the lilac bushes, listening in trembling silence to Thomas Bilson's tread, which came nearer and nearer. Now he was at the gate which led to the back of the house. Now he had entered, hushing his whistle, as he always did, "out of respect to the quality," as soon as he got into the garden. A moment more and the deed would be done. It was not too late yet, could one thought of kindness have crept into Jane Fawcet's dark, guilty heart. Even now she could have stayed his hand, she could have called him back. Just one word would have done it.

But she did not speak that word. Hiding there, unseen in the shadow of the trees, she watched him go to that door. Just a little pause as he stopped to feel for the bell, and then a loud, long peal, woke every echo of the old house.

It woke May, too.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



